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VOL. 2451. *x 2452*

JESS BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 1. *x 2.*

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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COLLECTION
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JESS BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.

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VOL. I.



TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

By the same Author,

KING SOLOMON'S MINES	1 vol.
SHE, A HISTORY OF ADVENTURE	2 vols.

JESS

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD,

AUTHOR OF "SHE, A HISTORY OF ADVENTURE,"
ETC. ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1887.

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TO MY WIFE.

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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME I.

	Page
CHAPTER I. John has an Adventure	9
— II. How the Sisters came to Mooifontein .	20
— III. Mr. Frank Muller	40
— IV. Bessie is asked in Marriage	54
— V. Dreams are Foolishness	70
— VI. The Storm breaks	83
— VII. Love's young Dream	100
— VIII. Jess goes to Pretoria	115
— IX. Jantjé's Story	129
— X. John has an Escape	142
— XI. On the Brink	163
— XII. Over it	177
— XIII. Frank Muller shows his Hand	195
— XIV. John to the Rescue	211

	Page
CHAPTER XV. A rough Journey	227
— XVI. Pretoria	242
— XVII. The Twelfth of February	256
— XVIII. And after	274



J E S S.

CHAPTER I.

JOHN HAS AN ADVENTURE.

THE day had been very hot even for the Transvaal, where the days still know how to be hot in the autumn, although the neck of the summer is broken—especially when the thunderstorms hold off for a week or two, as they occasionally do. Even the succulent blue lilies—a variety of the agapanthus which is so familiar to us in English greenhouses—hung their long trumpet-shaped flowers and looked oppressed and miserable, beneath the burning breath of the hot wind which had been blowing for hours like the draught from a volcano. The grass, too, near the wide roadway that stretched in a feeble and indeterminate sort of fashion across the veldt, forking, branching, and reuniting like the

veins on a lady's arm, was completely coated over with a thick layer of red dust. But the hot wind was going down now, as it always does towards sunset. Indeed, all that remained of it were a few strictly local and miniature whirlwinds, which would suddenly spring up on the road itself, and twist and twirl fiercely round, raising a mighty column of dust fifty feet or more into the air, where it hung long after the wind had passed, and then slowly dissolved as its particles floated to the earth.

Coming along the road, in the immediate track of one of these desultory and inexplicable whirlwinds, was a man on horseback. The man looked limp and dirty, and the horse limper and dirtier. The hot wind had "taken all the bones out of them," as the Kafirs say, which was not very much to be wondered at, seeing that they had been journeying through it for the last four hours without offsaddling. Suddenly the whirlwind, which had been travelling along pretty smartly, halted, and the dust, after turning round a few times in the air like a dying top, slowly began to dissolve in the accustomed fashion. The man on the horse halted too, and contemplated it in an absent kind of way.

"It's just like a man's life," he said aloud to his horse, "coming from nobody knows where, nobody knows why, and making a little column of dust on the world's highway, and then passing away and leaving the dust to fall to the ground again, and be trodden under foot and forgotten."

The speaker, a stout, well set-up, rather ugly man, apparently on the wrong side of thirty, with pleasant blue eyes and a reddish peaked beard, laughed a little at his own sententious reflection, and then gave his jaded horse a tap with the sjambock in his hand.

"Come on, Blesbok," he said, "or we shall never get to old Croft's place to-night. By Jove! I believe that must be the turn," and he pointed with his whip to a little rutty track that turned from the Wakkerstroom main road and stretched away towards a curious isolated hill with a large flat top, that rose out of the rolling plain some four miles to the right. "The old Boer said the second turn," he went on still talking to himself, "but perhaps he lied. I am told that some of them think it a good joke to send an Englishman a few miles wrong. Let's see, they said the place was under the lee of a table-topped hill, about half an hour's ride from the main road, and that

is a table-topped hill, so I think I will try it. Come on, Blesbok," and he put the tired nag into a sort of "tripple" or ambling canter much affected by South African horses.

"Life is a queer thing," reflected Captain John Niel to himself as he slowly cantered along. "Now here am I, at the age of thirty-four, about to begin the world again as assistant to an old Transvaal farmer. It is a pretty end to all one's ambitions, and to fourteen years' work in the army; but it is what it has come to, my boy, so you had better make the best of it."

Just then his cogitations were interrupted, for on the farther side of a gentle slope there suddenly appeared an extraordinary sight. Over the crest of the rise of land, now some four or five hundred yards away, a pony with a lady on its back came wildly galloping, and after it, with wings spread and outstretched neck, a huge cock ostrich was speeding along, covering twelve or fifteen feet at every stride of its long legs. The pony was still twenty yards ahead of the bird, and coming towards John rapidly, but strive as it would it could not distance the swiftest thing on all the earth. Five seconds passed—the great bird was close alongside now—Ah! and John

Niel turned sick and shut his eyes as he rode, for he saw the ostrich's thick leg fly high into the air and then sweep down like a leaded bludgeon!

Thud! It had missed the lady and struck her horse upon the spine, just behind the saddle, for the moment completely paralysing it so that it fell all of a heap on to the veldt. In a moment the girl on its back was up and off, running towards him, and after her came the ostrich. Up went the great leg again, but before it could come crashing on to her shoulders she had flung herself face downwards on the grass. In an instant the huge bird was on the top of her, kicking at her, rolling over her, and crushing the very life out of her. It was at this juncture that John Niel arrived upon the scene. The moment the ostrich saw him it gave up its attacks upon the lady on the ground and began to waltz towards him with a pompous sort of step that these birds sometimes assume before they give battle. Now Captain Niel was unaccustomed to the pleasant ways of ostriches, and so was his horse, which showed a strong inclination to bolt; as, indeed, under other circumstances, his rider would have been glad to do himself. But he could not abandon

beauty in distress, so, finding it impossible to control his horse, he slipped off it, and with his sjambock or hide-whip in his hand valiantly faced the enemy. For a moment or two the great bird stood still, blinking its lustrous round eyes at him and gently swaying its graceful neck to and fro. Then all of a sudden it spread out its wings and came for him like a thunderbolt. He sprang to one side, and was aware of a rustle of rushing feathers, and of a vision of a thick leg striking downwards past his head. Fortunately it missed him, and the ostrich sped past like a flash. Before he could turn, however, it was back and had landed the full weight of one of its awful forward kicks in the broad of his shoulders, and away he went head-over-heels like a shot rabbit. In a second he was on his legs again, shaken indeed, but not much the worse, and perfectly mad with fury and pain. At him came the ostrich, and at the ostrich went he, catching it a blow across the slim neck with his sjambock, that staggered it for a moment. Profiting by the check, he seized the bird by the wing and held on like grim death with both hands. Then they began to gyrate, slowly at first, then quicker, and yet more quick, till at last it seemed to Cap-

tain John Niel that time and space and the solid earth were nothing but a revolving vision fixed somewhere in the watches of the night. Above him, like a stationary pivot, towered the tall graceful neck, beneath him spun the top-like legs, and in front of him was a soft black and white mass of feathers.

Thud, and a cloud of stars! He was on his back, and the ostrich, which did not seem to be affected by giddiness, was on *him*, punishing him dreadfully. Luckily an ostrich cannot kick a man very hard when he is flat on the ground. If he could, there would have been an end of John Niel, and his story need never have been written.

Half a minute or so passed, during which the bird worked his sweet will upon his prostrate enemy, and at the end of it the man began to feel very much as though his earthly career was closed. Just as things were growing faint and dim to him, however, he suddenly saw a pair of white arms clasp themselves round the ostrich's legs from behind, and heard a voice cry:

"Break his neck while I hold his legs, or he will kill you."

This roused him from his torpor, and he staggered to his feet. Meanwhile the ostrich and

the young lady had come to the ground, and were rolling about together in a confused heap, over which the elegant neck and open hissing mouth wavered to and fro like a cobra about to strike. With a rush he seized the neck in both his hands, and, putting out all his strength (for he was a strong man), he twisted it till it broke with a snap, and after a few wild and convulsive bounds and struggles the great bird lay dead.

Then he sank down dazed and exhausted, and surveyed the scene. The ostrich was perfectly quiet, and would never kick again, and the lady too was quiet. He wondered vaguely if the brute had killed her—he was as yet too weak to go and see—and then fell to gazing at her face. Her head was pillowed on the body of the dead bird, and its feathery plumes made it a fitting resting-place. Slowly it dawned on him that the face was very beautiful, although it looked so pale just now. Low broad brow, crowned with soft yellow hair, the chin very round and white, the mouth sweet though rather large. The eyes he could not see, because they were closed, for the lady had fainted. For the rest, she was quite young—about twenty, tall and finely formed. Presently he got a little better, and, creeping to-

wards her (for he was sadly knocked about), took her hand and began to chafe it between his own. It was a well-formed hand, but brown, and showed signs of doing plenty of hard work. Soon she opened her eyes, and he noted with satisfaction that they were very good eyes, blue in colour. Then she sat up and laughed a little.

"Well, I am silly," she said; "I believe I fainted."

"It is not much to be wondered at," said John Niel politely, and lifting his hand to take off his hat, only to find that it had gone in the fray. "I hope you are not very much hurt by the bird."

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "But I am glad that you killed the skellum (vicious beast). He got out of the ostrich camp three days ago, and has been lost ever since. He killed a boy last year, and I told uncle he ought to shoot him then, but he would not, because he was such a beauty."

"Might I ask," said John Niel, "are you Miss Croft?"

"Yes, I am—one of them. There are two of us, you know; and I can guess who you are—

you are Captain Niel, whom Uncle is expecting to help him with the farm and the ostriches."

"If all of them are like that," he said, pointing to the dead bird, "I don't think that I shall take kindly to ostrich farming."

She laughed, showing a charming line of teeth. "Oh no," she said, "he was the only bad one—but, Captain Niel, I think you will find it fearfully dull. There are nothing but Boers about here, you know. There are no English people nearer than Wakkerstroom."

"You overlook yourself," he said politely; for really this daughter of the wilderness had a very charming air about her.

"Oh," she answered, "I am only a girl, you know, and besides, I am not clever. Jess, now—that's my sister—Jess has been at school at Cape Town, and she *is* clever. I was at Cape Town, too, but I didn't learn much there. But, Captain Niel, both the horses have bolted; mine has gone home, and I expect yours has followed, and I should like to know how we are going to get up to Mooifontein (beautiful fountain, that's what we call our place, you know). Can you walk?"

"I don't know," he answered doubtfully; "I'll try. That bird has knocked me about a good

deal," and accordingly he staggered on to his legs, only to collapse with an exclamation of pain. His ankle was sprained, and he was so stiff and bruised that he could hardly stir. "How far is the house?" he asked.

"Only about a mile—just there; we shall see it from the crest of the rise. Look, I'm all right. It was silly to faint, but he kicked all the breath out of me," and she got up and danced a little on the grass to show him. "My word, though, I am sore! You must take my arm, that's all; that is if you don't mind?"

"Oh dear no, indeed, I don't mind," he said laughing; and so they started, arm affectionately linked in arm.

CHAPTER II.

HOW THE SISTERS CAME TO MOOIFONTEIN.

"CAPTAIN NIEL," said Bessie Croft (for that was her name) when they had painfully limped one hundred yards or so, "will you think me rude if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all."

"What has induced you to come and bury yourself in this place?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't think that you will like it. I don't think," she added slowly, "that it is a fit place for an English gentleman and an army officer like you. You will find the Boer ways horrid, and then there will only be my old uncle and us two for you to associate with."

John Niel laughed. "English gentlemen are not so particular nowadays, I can tell you, Miss Croft, especially when they have to earn a living. Take my case, for instance, for I may as well tell

you exactly how I stand. I have been in the army fourteen years, and I am now thirty-four. Well, I have been able to live there because I had an old aunt who allowed me 120*l.* a year. Six months ago she died, leaving me the little property she possessed, for most of her income came from an annuity. After paying expenses, duty, &c., it amounts to 1,115*l.* Now, the interest on that is about fifty pounds a year, and I can't live in the army on that. Just after my aunt's death I came to Durban with my regiment from Mauritius, and now they are ordered home. Well, I liked the country, and I knew that I could not afford to live at home, so I got a year's leave of absence, and made up my mind to have a look round to see if I could not take to farming. Then a gentleman in Durban told me of your uncle, and said that he wanted to dispose of a third interest in his place for a thousand pounds, as he was getting too old to manage it himself: and so I entered into correspondence with him, and agreed to come up for a few months to see how I liked it; and accordingly here I am, just in time to save you from being knocked to bits by an ostrich."

"Yes, indeed," she answered, laughing; "you've

had a warm welcome at any rate. Well, I hope you will like it."

Just as he finished his story they got to the top of the rise over which the ostrich had pursued Bessie Croft, and saw a Kafir coming towards them, leading the pony in one hand and Captain Niel's horse in the other. About twenty yards behind the horses a lady was walking.

"Ah," said Bessie, "they've caught the horses, and here is Jess come to see what is the matter."

By this time the lady in question was quite close, so that John was able to get a first impression of her. She was small and rather thin, with quantities of curling brown hair; not by any means a lovely woman, as her sister undoubtedly was, but possessing two very remarkable characteristics — a complexion of extraordinary and uniform pallor, and a pair of the most beautiful dark eyes he had ever looked on. Altogether, though her size was almost insignificant, she was a striking-looking person, with a face one was not likely to forget. Before he had time to observe any more they were up to them.

"What on earth is the matter, Bessie?" she said, with a quick glance at her companion, and

speaking in a low full voice, with just a slight South African accent, that is taking enough in a pretty woman. Whereon Bessie broke out with a history of their adventure, appealing to her companion for confirmation at intervals.

Meanwhile her sister Jess stood quite still and silent, and it struck Captain Niel that her face was the most singularly impassive one he had ever seen. It never changed, even when her sister told how the ostrich rolled on her and nearly killed her, or how they finally subdued the foe. "Dear me," he thought to himself, "what a very remarkable woman! She can't have much heart." But just as he thought it the girl looked up, and then he saw where the expression lay. It was in those remarkable eyes. Impassive as her face was, the dark eyes were alight with life and a sort of excitement that made them shine gloriously. The contrast between the shining eyes and the impassive face beneath them struck him as so extraordinary as to be almost uncanny; and, as a matter of fact, it was doubtless both unusual and remarkable.

"You have had a wonderful escape, but I am sorry for the bird," she said at last.

"Why?" asked John.

"Because we were great friends. I was the only person who could manage him."

"Yes," put in Bessie, "the savage brute would follow her about like a dog. It was just the oddest thing I ever saw. But come on; we must be getting home, it's growing dark. Mouti" (medicine) —addressing the Kafir in Zulu—"help Captain Niel on to his horse. Be careful that the saddle does not twist round; the girths may be loose."

Thus adjured, John, with the help of the Zulu, clambered into his saddle, an example that the lady quickly followed, and they once more set off through the gathering darkness. Presently he became aware that they were passing up a drive bordered by tall blue-gums, and next minute the barking of a large dog, which he afterwards knew by the name of Stomp, and the sudden appearance of lighted windows told him that they had reached the house. At the door—or rather, opposite to it, for there was a verandah in front—they stopped and got off their horses. As they did so there came a shout of welcome from the house, and presently in the doorway, showing out clear against the light, appeared a striking and, in its way, most pleasant figure. He—for it was

a man—was very tall, or, rather, he had been very tall. Now he was much bent with age and rheumatism. His long white hair hung low upon his neck, and fell back from a prominent brow. The top of the head was quite bald, like the tonsure of a priest, and shone and glistened in the lamplight, and round this oasis the thin white locks fell down. The face was shrivelled like the surface of a well-kept apple, and, like an apple, rosy red. The features were aquiline and well marked, the eye-brows still black and very bushy, and beneath them shone a pair of grey eyes, as keen and bright as hawks'. But for all its sharpness, there was nothing unpleasant or fierce about the face. On the contrary, it was pervaded by a remarkable air of good-nature and pleasant shrewdness. For the rest, the man was dressed in rough tweed clothes, tall riding-boots, and held a broad-brimmed Boer hunting-hat in his hand. Such was the outer person of old Silas Croft, one of the most remarkable men in the Transvaal, as John Niel first saw him.

“Is that you, Captain Niel?” roared out the stentorian voice. “The natives said you were coming. A welcome to you! I am glad to see you—very glad. Why, what is the matter with

you?" he went on as the Zulu Mouti ran to help him off his horse.

"Matter, Mr. Croft?" answered John; "why, the matter is that your favourite ostrich has nearly killed me and your niece here, and that I have killed your favourite ostrich."

Then followed explanations from Bessie, during which he was helped off his horse and into the house.

"It serves me right," said the old man. "To think of it now, just to think of it! Well, Bessie, my love, thank God that you escaped—ay, and you too, Captain Niel. Here, you boys, take the Scotch cart and a couple of oxen and go and fetch the brute home. We may as well have the feathers off him, at any rate, before the aasvögels (vultures) tear him to bits."

After he had washed himself and tended his injuries with arnica and water, John managed to get into the principal sitting-room, where supper was waiting. It was a very pleasant room, furnished in European style, and carpeted with mats made of springbuck skins. In the corner was a piano, and by it a book-case, filled with the works of standard authors, the property, as John rightly guessed, of Bessie's sister Jess.

Supper went off pleasantly enough, and after it was over the two girls sang and played whilst the men smoked. And here a fresh surprise awaited him, for after Bessie, who had now apparently almost recovered from her mauling, had played a piece or two creditably enough, Jess, who so far had been nearly silent, sat down to the piano. She did not do this willingly, indeed, for it was not until her patriarchal uncle had insisted in his ringing, cheery voice that she should let Captain Niel hear how she could sing that she consented. But at last she did consent, and then, after letting her fingers stray somewhat aimlessly along the chords, she suddenly broke out into such song as John Niel had never heard before. Her voice, beautiful as it was, was not what is known as a cultivated voice, and it was a German song, and therefore he did not understand it, but there was no need of words to translate its burden. Passion, despairing yet hoping through its despair, echoed in its every line, and love, unending love, hovered over the glorious notes—nay, descended on them like a spirit, and made them his. Up! up! rang her wild sweet voice, thrilling his nerves till they answered to the music as an *Æolian* harp an-

swers to the winds. On went the song with a divine sweep, like the sweep of rushing pinions; higher, yet higher it soared, lifting up the listener's heart far above the world on the trembling wings of sound—ay, even higher, till the music hung at heaven's gate, and then it fell, swiftly as an eagle falls, quivered, and was dead.

John gave a gasp, and, so strongly was he moved, sank back in his chair, feeling almost faint with the revulsion of feeling that ensued when the notes had died away. He looked up, and caught Bessie watching him with an air of curiosity and amusement. Jess was still leaning against the piano and gently touching the notes, over which her head was bent low, showing the coils of curling hair which were twisted round it like a coronet.

"Well, Captain Niel," said the old man, waving his pipe in her direction, "and what do you say to my singing-bird's music, eh? Isn't it enough to draw the heart out of a man, eh, and turn his marrow to water, eh?"

"I never heard anything quite like it," he answered simply, "and I have heard most singers. It is beautiful. Certainly, I never expected to hear such singing in the Transvaal."

She turned quickly, and he observed that, though her eyes were alight with excitement, her face was as impassive as ever.

"There is no need for you to laugh at me, Captain Niel," she said quickly, and then, with an abrupt "Good-night," left the room.

The old man smiled, jerked the stem of his pipe over his shoulder after her, and winked in a way that, no doubt, meant unutterable things, but which did not convey much to his astonished guest, who sat still and said nothing. Then Bessie got up and bade him good-night in her pleasant voice, and with housewifely care inquired as to whether his room was to his liking, and how many blankets he liked upon his bed, telling him that if he found the odour of the moonflowers that grew near the verandah too strong, he had better shut the right-hand window and open that on the other side of the room; and then at length, with a piquant little nod of her golden head, she went off, looking, he thought as he watched her retreating figure, about as healthy, graceful, and generally satisfactory a young woman as a man could wish to see.

"Take a glass of grog, Captain Niel," said the old man, pushing the square bottle towards

him, "you'll need it after the mauling that brute gave you. By-the-way, I haven't thanked you enough for saving my Bessie! But I do thank you, yes, that I do. I must tell you that Bessie is my favourite niece. Never was there such a girl—never. Moves like a springbuck, and what an eye and form! Work, too—she'll do as much work as three. There's no nonsense about Bessie, none at all. She's not a fine lady, for all her fine looks."

"The two sisters seem very different," said John.

"Ay, you're right there," said the old man. "You'd never think that the same blood ran in their veins, would you? There's three years between them, that's one thing. Bessie's the youngest, you see—she's just twenty, and Jess is twenty-three. Lord, to think that it is twenty-three years since that girl was born! And theirs was a queer story too."

"Indeed?" said his listener interrogatively.

"Ay," he went on absently, knocking out his pipe, and refilling it out of a big brown jar of coarse-cut Boer tobacco, "I'll tell it to you if you like: you are going to live in the house, and

you may as well know it. I am sure, Captain Niel, that it will go no further. You see I was born in England, yes, and well-born too. I come from Cambridgeshire — from the fat fen-land down round Ely. My father was a clergyman. Well, he wasn't rich, and when I was twenty he gave me his blessing, thirty sovereigns in my pocket, and my passage to the Cape; and I shook his hand, God bless him, and off I came, and here in the old colony and this country I have been for fifty years, for I was seventy yesterday. Well, I'll tell you more about that another time, it's about the girls I'm speaking now. After I left home—twenty years after, or hard on it—my dear old father married again, a youngish woman with some money, but beneath him somewhat in life, and by her he had one son, and then died. Well, it was but little I heard of my half-brother, except that he had turned out very badly, married, and taken to drink, till one night some twelve years ago, when a strange thing happened. I was sitting here in this very room, ay, in this very chair—for this part of the house was up then, though the wings weren't built—and smoking my pipe, and listening to the lashing of the rain, for it was a very foul night,

when suddenly an old pointer dog I had, named Ben, gave a bark.

“‘Lie down, Ben, it’s only the Kafirs,’ said I.

“Just then I thought I heard a faint sort of rapping at the door, and Ben barked again, so I got up and opened it, and in came two little girls wrapped up in old shawls or some such gear. Well, I shut the door, looking out first to see if there were any more outside, and then I stood and stared at the two little things with my mouth open. There they stood, hand in hand, the water dripping from both of them, and the eldest might have been eleven, and the second about eight. They didn’t say anything, but the eldest turned and took the shawl and hat off the younger—that was Bessie—and there was her sweet little face and her golden hair, and damp enough both of them were, and she put her thumb in her mouth, and stood and looked at me till I began to think that I was dreaming.

“‘Please, sir,’ said the biggest at last, ‘is this Mr. Croft’s house—Mr. Croft—South African Republic?’

“‘Yes, little Miss, this is his house, and this is the South African Republic, and I am he.

And now who might you be, my dears?' I answered.

"‘If you please, sir, we are your nieces, and we have come to you from England.’

"‘What!’ I holloaed, startled out of my wits, as well I might be.

"‘Oh, sir,’ says the poor little thing, clasping her thin wet hands, ‘please don’t send us away. Bessie is so wet, and cold and hungry too, she isn’t fit to go any farther.’

And she set to work to cry, whereon the little one cried too, from fright and cold and sympathy.

"Well, of course, I took them both to the fire, and set them on my knees, and holloaed for Hebe, the old Hottentot woman who did my cooking, and between us we undressed them, and wrapped them up in some old clothes, and fed them with soup and wine, so that in half an hour they were quite happy and not a bit frightened.

"‘And now, young ladies,’ I said, ‘come and give me a kiss, both of you, and tell me how you came here.’

"And this is the tale they told me—com-

pleted, of course, from what I learnt afterwards—and an odd one it is. It seems that my half-brother married a Norfolk lady—a sweet young thing—and treated her like a dog. He was a drunken rascal, was my half-brother, and he beat his poor wife and shamefully neglected her, and even ill-treated the two little girls, till at last the poor woman, weak as she was from suffering and ill-health, could bear it no longer, and formed the wild idea of escaping to this country and throwing herself upon my protection. It will show how desperate she must have been. She scraped together and borrowed some money, enough to pay for three second-class passages to Natal and a few pounds over, and one day, when her brute of a husband was away on the drink and gamble, she slipped on board a sailing ship in the London Docks, and before he knew anything about it they were well out to sea. But it was her last effort, poor dear soul, and the excitement of it finished her. Before they had been ten days at sea, she sank and died, and the two poor children were left alone. And what they must have suffered, or rather what poor Jess must have suffered, for she was old enough to feel, God only knows. But I can tell you this,

she has never got over the shock to this hour. It has left its mark on her, sir. But, let people say what they will, there is a Power who looks after the helpless, and that Power took those poor, homeless, wandering children under its wing. The captain of the vessel befriended them, and when at last they got to Durban some of the passengers made a subscription, and got an old Boer, who was coming up this way with his wife to the Transvaal, to take them under his charge. The Boer and his vrouw treated the children fairly well, but they did not do one thing more than they bargained for. At the turn from the Wakkerstroom road, that you came along to-day, they put the children down, for they had no luggage with them, and told them that if they went along there they would come to Meinheer Croft's house. That was in the middle of the afternoon, and they were till eight o'clock getting here, poor little dears, for the track was fainter then than it is now, and they wandered off into the veldt, and would have perished there in the wet and cold had they not chanced to see the lights of the house. And that was how my nieces came here, Captain Niel. And here they have been ever since, except for a couple of years when I

sent them to the Cape for schooling, and a lonely man I was when they were away."

"And how about the father?" asked John Niel, deeply interested. "Did you ever hear any more of him?"

"Hear of him, the villain!" almost shouted the old man, jumping up in wrath. "Ay, d—n him, I heard of him. What do you think? The two chicks had been with me some eighteen months, long enough for me to learn to love them with all my heart, when one fine morning, as I was seeing about the new kraal wall, I see a fellow come riding up on an old raw-boned grey horse. Up he comes to me, and as he came I looked at him, and said to myself, 'You are a drunkard you are, and a rogue, it's written on your face, and, what's more, I know your face.' You see I did not guess that it was a son of my own father's that I was looking at. How should I?"

"'Is your name Croft?' he said.

"'Ay,' I answered.

"'So is mine,' he went on with a sort of a drunken leer. 'I'm your brother.'

"'Are you?' I said, beginning to get my back up, for I guessed what his game was, 'and what

may you be after? I tell you at once, and to your face, that if you are my brother you are a blackguard, and I don't want to know you or have anything to do with you; and if you are not, I beg your pardon for coupling you with such a scoundrel.'

"'Oh, that's your tune, is it?' he said with a sneer. 'Well, now, my dear brother Silas, I want my children. They have got a little half-brother at home—for I have married again, Silas—who is anxious to have them to play with, so if you will be so good as to hand them over, I'll take them away at once.'

"'You'll take them away, will you?' said I, all of a tremble with rage and fear.

"'Yes, Silas, I will. They are mine by law, and I am not going to breed children for you to have the comfort of their society. I've taken advice, Silas, and that's sound law,' and he leered at me again.

"I stood and looked at that man, and thought of how he had treated those poor children and their young mother, and my blood boiled, and I grew mad. Without another word I jumped over the half-finished wall, and caught him by the leg (for I was a strong man ten years ago) and jerked

him off the horse. As he came down he dropped the sjambock from his hand, and I caught hold of it and then and there gave him the soundest hiding a man ever had. Lord, how he did hol-loa! When I was tired I let him get up.

“‘Now,’ I said, ‘be off with you, and if you come back here I’ll bid the Kafirs hunt you back to Natal with their sticks. This is the South African Republic, and we don’t care overmuch about law here.’ Which we didn’t in those days.

“‘All right, Silas,’ he said, ‘all right, you shall pay for this. I’ll have those children, and, for your sake, I’ll make their life a hell—you mark my words—South African Republic or no South African Republic. I’ve got the law on my side.’

“Off he rode, cursing and swearing, and I flung his sjambock after him. And it was the first and last time that I saw my brother.”

“What became of him?” asked John Niel.

“I’ll tell you, just to show you again that there is a Power who keeps such men in its eye. He got back to Newcastle that night, and went about the canteen there abusing me, and getting drunker and drunker, till at last the canteen keeper sent for his boys to turn him out. Well, the boys were rough, as Kafirs are apt to be with a drunken

white man, and he struggled and fought, and in the middle of it the blood began to run from his mouth, and he dropped down dead of a broken blood-vessel, and there was an end of him. That is the story of the two girls, Captain Niel, and now I am off to bed. To-morrow I'll show you round the farm, and we will have a talk about business. Good-night to you, Captain Niel. Good-night!"

CHAPTER III.

MR. FRANK MULLER.

JOHN NIEL woke early the next morning, feeling as sore and stiff as though he had been well beaten and then strapped up tight in horse-girths. He made shift, however, to dress himself, and then, with the help of a stick, limped through the French windows that opened from his room on to the verandah, and surveyed the scene before him. It was a delightful spot. At the back of the house was the steep boulder-strewn face of the flat-topped hill that curved round on each side, embosoming a great slope of green, in the lap of which the house was placed. The house itself was solidly built of brown stone, and, with the exception of the waggon-shed and other outhouses which were roofed with galvanised iron, that shone and glistened in the rays of the morning sun in a way which would have made an eagle blink, was covered with rich brown thatch. All along its front ran a wide verandah, up the

trellis-work of which green vines and blooming creepers trailed pleasantly, and beyond was the broad carriage-drive of red soil, bordered with bushy orange-trees laden with odorous flowers and green and golden fruit. On the farther side of the orange-trees were the gardens, fenced in with low walls of rough stone, and the orchard full of standard fruit-trees, and beyond these again the oxen and ostrich kraals, the latter full of long-necked birds. To the right of the house grew thriving plantations of blue-gum and black wattle, and to the left was a broad stretch of cultivated lands, lying so that they could be irrigated for winter crops by means of water led from the great spring that gushed from the mountain-side high above the house, and gave its name of Mooifontein to the place.

All these and many more things John Niel saw as he looked out from the verandah at Mooifontein, but for the moment at any rate they were lost in the wild and wonderful beauty of the panorama that rolled away for miles and miles at his feet, till it was ended by the mighty range of the Drakensberg to the left, tipped here and there with snow, and by the dim and vast horizon of the swelling Transvaal plains to the

right and far in front of him. It was a beautiful sight, and one to make the blood run in a man's veins, and his heart beat happily because he was alive to see it. Mile upon mile of grass-clothed veldt beneath, bending and rippling like a corn-field in the quick breath of the morning, space upon space of deep-blue sky overhead with ne'er a cloud to dim it, and the swift rush of the wind between. Then to the left there, impressive to look on and conducive to solemn thoughts, the mountains rear their crests against the sky, and, crowned with the gathered snows of the centuries whose monuments they are, from æon to æon gaze majestically out over the wide plains and the ephemeral ant-like races who tread them, and while they endure think themselves the masters of their little world. And over all—mountain, plain, and flashing stream—the glorious light of the African sun and the Spirit of Life moving now as it once moved upon the darkling waters.

John stood and gazed at the untamed beauty of the scene, in his mind comparing it to many cultivated views that he had known, and coming to the conclusion that, however desirable the presence of civilised man might be in the world, it

could not be said that his operations really add to its beauty. For the old line, "Nature unadorned adorned the most," still remains true in more senses than one.

Presently his reflections were interrupted by the step of Silas Croft, which, notwithstanding his age and bent frame, still rang firm enough—and he turned to greet him.

"Well, Captain Niel," said the old man, "up already! It looks well if you mean to take to farming. Yes, it's a pretty view, and a pretty place too. Well, I made it. Twenty-five years ago I rode up here and saw this spot. Look, you see that rock there behind the house, I slept under it and woke at sunrise and looked out at this beautiful view and at the great veldt (it was all alive with game then), and I said to myself, 'Silas, for five-and-twenty years have you wandered about this great country, and now you are getting tired of it; you've never seen a fairer spot than this or a healthier; now be a wise man and stop here.' And so I did. I bought the 3,000 morgen (6,000 acres), more or less, for 10*l.* down and a case of gin, and I set to work to make this place, and you see I have made it. Ay, it has grown under my hand, every stone and tree of it, and

you know what that means in a new country. But one way and another I have done it, and now I have got too old to manage it, and that's how I came to give out that I wanted a partner, as old Snow told you down in Durban. You see, I told Snow it must be a gentleman; I don't care much about the money, I'll take a thousand for a third share if I can get a gentleman—none of your Boers or mean whites for me. I tell you I have had enough of Boers and their ways; the best day of my life was when old Shepstone ran up the Union Jack there in Pretoria and I could call myself an Englishman again. Lord! and to think that there are men who are subjects of the Queen and want to be subjects of a Republic again—Mad! Captain Niel, I tell you, quite mad! However, there's an end of it all now. You know what Sir Garnet Wolseley told them in the name of the Queen up at the Vaal River, that this country would remain English till the sun stood still in the heavens and the waters of the Vaal ran backwards. That's good enough for me, for, as I tell these grumbling fellows who want the land back now that we have paid their debts and defeated their enemies, no English Government goes back on its word, or breaks engagements

solemnly entered into by its representatives. We leave that sort of thing to foreigners. No, no, Captain Niel, I would not ask you to take a share in this place if I wasn't sure that it would remain under the British flag. But we will talk of all this another time, and now come in to breakfast."

After breakfast, as John was far too lame to go about the farm, the fair Bessie suggested that he should come and help her to wash a batch of ostrich feathers, and, accordingly, off he went. The *locus operandi* was in a space of lawn in the rear of a little clump of "naatche" orange-trees, of which the fruit is like that of the Maltese orange, only larger. Here were placed an ordinary washing-tub half-filled with warm water and a tin bath full of cold. The ostrich feathers, many of which were completely coated with red dirt, were plunged first into the tub of warm water, where John Niel scrubbed them with soap, and then transferred to the tin bath, where Bessie rinsed them and then laid them on a sheet in the sun to dry. The morning was very pleasant, and John soon came to the conclusion that there are many more disagreeable occupations in the world than the washing of ostrich feathers with a lovely

girl to help you. For there was no doubt but that she was lovely, looking a very type of happy, healthy womanhood as she sat opposite to him on the little stool, her sleeves rolled up almost to the shoulder, showing a pair of arms that would not have disgraced a statue of Venus, and laughed and chatted away as she washed the feathers. Now, John Niel was not a susceptible man: he had gone through the fire years before and burnt his fingers like many another confiding youngster, but, all the same, he did wonder as he sat there and watched this fair girl, who somehow reminded him of a rich rosebud bursting into bloom, how long it would be possible to live in the same house with her without falling under the spell of her charm and beauty. And then he began to think of Jess, and what a strange contrast the two were.

"Where is your sister?" he asked presently.

"Jess? oh, I think that she has gone to the Lion Kloof, reading or sketching, I don't know which. You see in this establishment I represent labour and Jess represents intellect," and she nodded her head prettily at him, and added, "There is a mistake somewhere, she got all the brains."

"Ah," said John quietly, and looking up at her, "I don't think that you are entitled to complain of the way that nature has treated you."

She blushed a little, more at the tone of his voice than the words, and went on hastily, "Jess is the dearest, best, and cleverest woman in the whole world—there, I believe that she has only one fault, and that is that she thinks too much about me. Uncle said that he had told you how we came here first when I was eight years old. Well, I remember that when we lost our way on the veldt that night, and it rained so and was so cold, Jess took off her own shawl and wrapped it round me over my own. Well, it has been just like that with her always. I am always to have the shawl—everything is to give way to me. But there, that is Jess all over; she is very cold, cold as a stone I sometimes think, but when she does care for anybody it is enough to frighten one. I don't know a great number of women, but somehow I don't think that there can be many in the world like Jess. She is too good for this wild place, she ought to go away to England and write books and become a famous woman, only——" she added reflectively, "I am afraid that Jess's books would all be sad ones."

Just then Bessie stopped talking and suddenly changed colour, the bunch of lank wet feathers she held in her hand dropping from it with a little splash back into the bath. Following her glance, John looked down the avenue of blue-gum trees and perceived a big man with a broad hat and mounted on a splendid black horse, cantering leisurely towards the house.

“Who is that, Miss Croft?” he asked.

“It is a man I don’t like,” she said with a little stamp of her foot. “His name is Frank Muller, and he is half a Boer and half an Englishman. He is very rich, and very clever, and owns all the land round this place, so uncle has to be civil to him, though he does not like him either. I wonder what he wants now.”

On came the horse, and John thought that its rider was going to pass without seeing them, when suddenly the movement of Bessie’s dress between the “naatche” trees caught his eye, and he pulled up and looked round. He was a large and exceedingly handsome man, apparently about forty years old, with clear-cut features, cold, light-blue eyes, and a remarkable golden beard that hung right down over his chest. For a Boer he

was rather smartly dressed in English-made tweed clothes, and tall riding-boots.

"Ah, Miss Bessie," he called out in English, "there you are, with your pretty arms all bare. I'm in luck to come just in time to see them. Shall I come and help you to wash the feathers? Only say the word, now——"

Just then he caught sight of John Niel and checked himself.

"I have come to look for a black ox, branded with a heart and a 'W' inside of the heart. Do you know if your uncle has seen it on the place anywhere?"

"No, Meinheer Muller," replied Bessie, coldly, "but he is down there," pointing at a kraal on the plain some half-mile away, "if you want to go and ask about it."

"*Mr.* Muller," said he, by way of correction, and with a curious contraction of the brow. "'Meinheer' is very well for the Boers, but we are all Englishmen now. Well, the ox can wait. With your permission, I'll stop here till 'Oom' Croft [Uncle Croft] comes back," and, without further ado, he jumped off his horse and, slipping the reins over its head as an indication to it to stand still, advanced towards Bessie with out-

stretched hand. As he did so the young lady plunged both her arms up to the elbow in the bath, and it struck John, who was observing the whole scene, that she did this in order to avoid the necessity of shaking hands with her stalwart visitor.

"Sorry my hands are wet," she said, giving him a cold little nod. "Let me introduce you, Mr. (with emphasis) Frank Muller—Captain Niel—who has come to help my uncle with the place."

John stretched out his hand and Muller shook it.

"Captain," he said interrogatively—"a ship captain, I suppose?"

"No," said John, "a Captain of the English Army."

"Oh, a 'rooibaatje' (red jacket). Well, I don't wonder at your taking to farming after the Zulu war."

"I don't quite understand you," said John, rather coldly.

"Oh, no offence, Captain, no offence. I only meant that you rooibaatjes did not come very well out of the war. I was there with Piet Uys, and it was a sight, I can tell you. A Zulu had only

to show himself at night and one would see your regiments 'skreck' [stampede] like a span of oxen when they wind a lion. And then they'd fire—ah, they did fire—anyhow, anywhere, but mostly at the clouds, there was no stopping them; and so, you see, I thought that you would like to turn your sword into a ploughshare, as the Bible says—but no offence, I'm sure—no offence."

All this while John Niel, being English to his backbone, and cherishing the reputation of his profession almost as dearly as his own honour, was boiling with inward wrath, which was all the fiercer because he knew there was some truth in the Boer's insults. He had the sense, however, to keep his temper—outwardly, at any rate.

"I was not in the Zulu war, Mr. Muller," he said, and just then old Silas Croft came riding up, and the conversation dropped.

Mr. Frank Muller stopped to dinner and far on into the afternoon. His lost ox seemed to have entirely slipped his memory. There he sat close to the fair Bessie, smoking and drinking gin-and-water, and talking with great volubility in English sprinkled with Boer-Dutch terms that John Niel did not understand, and gazing at the young lady in a manner which John somehow

found unpleasant. Of course it was no affair of his, and he had no interest in the matter, but for all that he found this remarkable-looking Dutchman exceedingly disagreeable. At last, indeed, he could stand it no longer, and hobbled out for a little walk with Jess, who, in her abrupt way, offered to show him the garden.

"You don't like that man?" she said to him, as they slowly went down the slope in front of the house.

"No; do you?"

"I think," replied Jess, slowly and with much emphasis, "that he is the most odious man that I ever saw—and the most curious;" and then she relapsed into silence, only broken now and again by an occasional remark about the flowers and trees.

Half an hour afterwards, when they arrived again at the top of the slope, Mr. Muller was just riding off down the avenue of blue gums. By the verandah stood a Hottentot named Jantjé, who had been holding the Dutchman's horse. He was a curious, wizened-up little fellow, dressed in rags, and with hair like the worn tags of a black woollen carpet. His age might have been anything between twenty-five and sixty; it was

impossible to form any opinion on the point. Just now, however, his yellow monkey face was convulsed with an expression of intense malignity, and he was standing there in the sunshine cursing rapidly and beneath his breath in Dutch, and shaking his fist after the form of the retreating Boer—a very epitome of impotent but overmastering passion.

“What is he doing?” asked John.

Jess laughed. “Jantjé does not like Frank Muller any more than I do, but I don’t know why. He will never tell me.”

CHAPTER IV.

BESSIE IS ASKED IN MARRIAGE.

IN due course John Niel got over his sprained ankle and the other injuries inflicted on him by the infuriated cock ostrich (it is, by the way, a humiliating thing to be knocked out of time by a feathered fowl), and set to work to learn the routine of farm life. He did not find this a disagreeable task, especially when he had so fair an instructress as Bessie, who knew all about it, to show him the way in which he should go. Naturally of an energetic and hard-working temperament, he very soon got more or less into the swing of the thing, and at the end of six weeks began to talk quite learnedly of cattle and ostriches and sweet and sour veldt. About once a week or so Bessie used to put him through a regular examination as to his progress; also she gave him lessons in Dutch and Zulu, both of which tongues she spoke to perfection; so it will be seen that he did not lack for pleasant and pro-

fitable employment. Another thing was that he grew much attached to old Silas Croft. The old gentleman, with his handsome, honest face, his large and varied stock of experience, and his sturdy English character, made a great impression on his mind. He had never met a man quite like him before. Nor was the liking unreciprocated, for his host took a wonderful fancy to John Niel.

"You see, my dear," he explained to his niece Bessie, "he's quiet, and he doesn't know much about farming, but he's willing to learn, and he's such a gentleman. Now, where one has Kafirs to deal with, as on a place like this, you must have a *gentleman*. Your mean white will never get anything out of a Kafir; that's why the Boers kill them and flog them, because they can't get anything out of them without. But you see Captain Niel gets on well enough with them. I think he'll do, my dear, I'll think he'll do," and Bessie quite agreed with him. And so it came to pass that after this six weeks' trial the bargain was finally struck, and John paid over his thousand pounds and became the owner of a third interest in Mooifontein.

Now it is not possible, in a general way, for

a youngish man like John Niel to live in the same house with a young and lovely woman like Bessie Croft without running more or less risk of entanglement. More especially is this so where the two people have little or no outside society or distraction to divert the attention from each other. Not that there was as yet at any rate the slightest hint of affection between them. Only they liked one another very much, and found it pleasant to be a good deal together. In short, they were walking along that easy, winding road which leads to the mountain paths of love. It is a very broad road, like another road that runs elsewhere, and, also like this last, it has a wide gate. Sometimes, too, it leads to destruction. But for all that it is a most agreeable one to follow hand-in-hand, winding as it does through the pleasant meadows of companionship. The view is rather limited, it is true, and homelike—full of familiar things. There stand the kine, knee-deep in the grass; there runs the water; and there grows the corn. Also one can stop if one likes. By-and-by it grows different. By-and-by, when the travellers tread the heights of passion, precipices will yawn and torrents rush, lightnings will fall and storms will blind; and who can

know that they will attain at last to that far-off peak, crowned with the glory of a perfect peace which men call Happiness? There are those who say it never can be reached, and that the halo which rests upon its slopes is no earthly light, but rather, as it were, a promise and a beacon—a glow reflected whence we know not, and lying on this alien earth as the sun's light lies on the dead bosom of the moon. Some say, again, that they have climbed its topmost pinnacle and tasted of the fresh breath of heaven which sweeps around its heights—ay, and heard the quiring of immortal harps and the swan-like sigh of angels' wings; and then behold! a mist has fallen upon them, and they have wandered in it, and when it cleared they were on the mountain paths again, and the peak was far away. And a few there are who tell us that they live there always, listening to the voice of God; but these are old and worn with journeying—men and women who have outlived passions and ambitions and the fire heats of love, and who now, girt about with memories, stand face to face with the sphinx Eternity.

But John Niel was no chicken, nor very likely to fall in love with the first pretty face he met. He had once, years ago, gone through that mel-

ancholy stage, and there, he thought, was an end of it. Another thing was that if Bessie attracted him, so did Jess in a different way. Before he had been a week in the house he had come to the conclusion that Jess was the strangest woman he had ever met, and in her own way one of the most attractive. Her very impassiveness added to her charm; for who is there in this world who does not like to learn a secret? To him Jess was a riddle of which he did not know the key. That she was clever and well-informed he soon discovered from her rare remarks; that she could sing like an angel he also knew; but what was the mainspring of her mind—round what axis did it revolve—that was what puzzled him. Clearly enough it was not like most women's, least of all like that of happy, healthy, plain-sailing Bessie. So curious did he become to fathom these mysteries that he took every opportunity to associate with her, and would even, when he had time, go out with her on her sketching, or rather flower-painting, expeditions. On these occasions she would sometimes begin to talk, but it was always about books, or England, or some intellectual question. She never spoke of herself.

Yet it soon became evident to John that she liked his society, and missed him when he did not come. It never occurred to him what a boon it was to a girl of considerable intellectual attainments, and still greater intellectual capacities and aspirations, to be thrown for the first time into the society of a cultivated and intelligent gentleman. John Niel was no empty-headed, one-sided individual. He had both read and thought, and even written a little, and in him Jess found a mind which, though of an inferior stamp, was more or less kindred to her own. Although he did not understand her she understood him, and at last, had he but known it, there rose a far-off dawning light upon the twilight of her mind that thrilled and changed it as the first faint rays of morning thrill and change the darkness of the night. What if she should learn to love this man, and teach him to love her? To most women such a thought involves more or less of the idea of marriage, and that change of status which they generally consider desirable. But Jess did not think much of that: what she did think of was the blessed possibility of being able to lay down her life, as it were, in the life of another—of at last finding somebody

who understood her and whom she could understand, who would cut the shackles that bound down the wings of her genius, so that she could rise and bear him with her as, in Bulwer Lytton's beautiful story, Zoe would have borne her lover. Here at length was a man who *understood*, who was something more than an animal, and who possessed the god-like gift of brains, the gift that had been more of a curse than a blessing to her, lifting her above the level of her sex and shutting her off as by iron doors from the understanding of those around her. Ah! if only this perfect love of which she had read so much would come to him and her, life might perhaps grow worth the living.

It is a curious thing, but in such matters most men never learn wisdom from experience. A man of John Niel's age might have guessed that it is dangerous work playing with explosives, and that the quietest, most harmless-looking substances are sometimes the most explosive. He might have known that to set to work to cultivate the society of a woman with such tell-tale eyes as Jess's was to run the risk of catching the fire from them himself, to say nothing of setting her alight: he might have known that to bring all

the weight of his cultivated mind to bear on her mind, to take the deepest interest in her studies, to implore her to let him see the poetry Bessie told him she wrote, but which she would show to no living soul, and to evince the most evident delight in her singing, were one and all dangerous things to do; and yet he did them and thought no harm.

As for Bessie, she was delighted that her sister should have found anybody whom she cared to talk to or who could understand her. It never occurred to her that Jess might fall in love. Jess was the last person in the world to fall in love. Nor did she calculate what the results might be to John. As yet, at any rate, she had no interest in Captain Niel—of course not.

And so things went on pleasantly enough to all concerned in this drama till one fine day when the storm-clouds began to gather. John had been about the farm as usual till dinner time, after which he took his gun and told Jantjé to saddle up his shooting pony. He was standing on the verandah, waiting for the pony to appear, and by him was Bessie, looking particularly attractive in a white dress, when suddenly he caught sight of Frank Muller's great black horse, and

that gentleman himself upon it, cantering up the avenue of blue gums.

"Hullo, Miss Bessie," he said, "here comes your friend."

"Bother!" said Bessie, stamping her foot, and then, with a quick look, "Why do you call him my friend?"

"I imagine that he considers himself so, to judge from the number of times a week he comes to see you," he answered with a shrug. "At any rate, he isn't mine, so I am off shooting. Good-bye. I hope that you will enjoy yourself."

"You are not kind," she said in a low voice, turning her back on him.

In another moment he was gone, and Frank Muller had arrived.

"How do you do, Miss Bessie?" he said, jumping from his horse with the rapidity of a man who had been accustomed to rough riding all his life. "Where is the 'rooibaasje' off to?"

"Captain Niel is going out shooting," she said coldly.

"Ah, so much the better for you and me, Miss Bessie! We can have a pleasant talk. Where is that black monkey Jantjé? Here, Jantjé, take

my horse, you ugly devil, and mind you look after him, or I'll cut the liver out of you!"

Jantjé took the horse, with a forced grin of appreciation at the joke, and led him off round the house.

"I don't think that Jantjé likes you, Meinheer Muller," said Bessie, spitefully, "and I don't wonder at it if you talk to him like that. He told me the other day that he had known you for twenty years," and she looked at him inquiringly.

This casual remark produced a remarkable effect on her visitor, who turned colour beneath his tanned skin.

"He lies, the black hound," he said, "and I'll put a bullet through him if he says it again! What should I know about him, or he about me? Can I keep count of every miserable man-monkey I meet?" and he muttered a string of Dutch oaths into his long beard.

"Really, Meinheer!" said Bessie.

"Why do you always call me 'Meinheer'?" he asked, turning so fiercely on her that she started back a step. "I tell you I am not a Boer. I am an Englishman. My mother was English; and besides, thanks to Lord Carnarvon, we are all English now."

"I don't see why you should mind being thought a Boer," she said coolly: "there are some very good people among the Boers, and besides, you used to be a great 'patriot.'"

"Used to be—yes; and so the trees used to bend to the north when the wind blew that way, but now they bend to the south, for the wind has turned. By-and-by it may set to the north again—that is another matter—then we shall see."

Bessie made no answer beyond pursing up her pretty mouth and slowly picking a leaf from the vine that trailed overhead.

The big Dutchman took off his hat and stroked his beard perplexedly. Evidently he was meditating something that he was afraid to say. Twice he fixed his cold eyes on Bessie's fair face, and twice looked down again. The second time she took alarm.

"Excuse me one minute," she said, and made as though to enter the house.

"Wacht een beeche" (wait a bit), he ejaculated, breaking into Dutch in his agitation, and even catching hold of her white dress with his big hand.

She drew the dress from him with a quick twist of her lithe form, and turned and faced him.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in a tone that could not be called encouraging: "you were going to say something."

"Yes—ah, that is—I was going to say——" and he paused.

Bessie stood with a polite look of expectation on her face and waited.

"I was going to say—that, in short, that I want to marry you!"

"Oh!" said Bessie, with a start.

"Listen," he went on hoarsely, his words gathering force as he went, as is the way even with uncultured people when they speak from the heart. "Listen! I love you, Bessie; I have loved you for three years. Every time I have seen you I have loved you more. Don't say me nay—you don't know how I do love you. I dream of you every night; sometimes I dream that I hear your dress rustling, and then you come and kiss me, and it is like being in heaven."

Here Bessie made a gesture of disgust.

"There, I have offended you, but don't be angry with me. I am very rich, Bessie; there is the place here, and then I have four farms in Lydenburg and ten thousand morgen up in Waterberg, and a thousand head of cattle, be-

sides sheep and horses and money in the bank. You shall have everything your own way," he went on, seeing that the inventory of his goods did not appear to impress her—"everything—the house shall be English fashion; I will build a new 'sit-kamé'"—(sitting-room)—"and it shall be furnished from Natal. There, I love you, I say. You won't say no, will you?" and he caught her by the hand.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Muller," answered Bessie, snatching away her hand, "but—in short, I cannot marry you. No, it is no use, I cannot indeed. There, please say no more—here comes my uncle. Forget all about it, Mr. Muller."

Her suitor looked up; there was old Silas Croft coming sure enough, but he was some way off, and walking slowly.

"Do you mean it?" he said beneath his breath.

"Yes, yes, of course I mean it. Why do you force me to repeat it?"

"It is that damned rooibaasje," he broke out. "You used not to be like this before. Curse him, the white-livered Englishman! I will be even with him yet; and I tell you what it is, Bessie: you shall marry me, whether you like it

or no. Look here, do you think I am the sort of man to play with? You go to Wakkerstroom and ask what sort of a man Frank Muller is. See! I want you—I must have you. I could not live if I thought that I should never get you for myself. And I tell you I will do it. I don't care if it costs me my life, and your rooibaatje's too. I'll do it if I have to stir up a revolt against the Government. There, I swear it by God or by the Devil, it's all one to me!" And growing inarticulate with passion, he stood there before her clinching and unclenching his great hand, and his lips trembling.

Bessie was very frightened; but she was a brave woman, and rose to the occasion.

"If you go on talking like that," she said, "I shall call my uncle. I tell you that I will not marry you, Frank Muller, and that nothing shall ever make me marry you. I am very sorry for you, but I have not encouraged you, and I will never marry you—never!"

He stood for half a minute or so looking at her, and then burst into a savage laugh.

"I think that some day or other I shall find a way to make you," he said, and, turning, went without another word.

A couple of minutes later Bessie heard the sound of a horse galloping, and looking up saw her wooer's powerful form vanishing down the vista of blue gums. Also she heard somebody crying out as though in pain at the back of the house, and, more to relieve her mind than anything else, went to see what it was. By the stable door she found the Hottentot Jantjé, twisting round and round and shrieking and cursing, holding his hand to his side, from which the blood was running.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Baas Frank!" he said—"Baas Frank hit me with his whip!"

"The brute!" said Bessie, the tears starting into her eyes with anger.

"Never mind, missie, never mind," said the Hottentot, his ugly face growing livid with fury, "it is only one more to me. I cut it on this stick"—and he held up a long thick stick he carried, on which were several notches, starting from three deep ones at the top just below the nob. "Let him look out sharp—let him search the grass—let him creep round the bush—let him look as he will, one day he will find Jantjé, and Jantjé will find him!"

"Why did Frank Muller gallop away like that?" asked her uncle of Bessie when she got back to the verandah.

"We had some words," she answered shortly, not seeing the use of explaining matters to the old man.

"Ah, indeed, indeed. Well, be careful, my love. It's ill to quarrel with a man like Frank Muller. I've known him for many years, and he has a black heart when he is crossed. You see, my love, you can deal with a Boer and you can deal with an Englishman, but cross-bred dogs are bad to handle. Take my advice, and make it up with Frank Muller."

All of which sage advice did not tend to raise Bessie's spirits, which were already sufficiently low.

CHAPTER V.

DREAMS ARE FOOLISHNESS.

WHEN John Niel left Bessie on the verandah at the approach of Frank Muller he had taken his gun, and, having whistled to the pointer dog Pontac, mounted his shooting pony and started out in quest of partridges. On the warm slopes of the hills round Wakkerstroom a large species of partridge is very abundant, especially in the patches of red grass in which the slopes are sometimes clothed. It is a merry sound to hear these partridges calling from all directions just after day-break, and one to make the heart of every true sportsman rejoice exceedingly. On leaving the house John proceeded up the side of the hill behind it—his pony picking its way carefully between the stones, and the dog Pontac ranging about two or three hundred yards off, for in this sort of country it is necessary to have a dog with a wide range. Presently John saw him

stop under a mimosa thorn and suddenly stiffen out as if he had been petrified, and made the best of his way towards him. Pontac stood still for a few seconds, and then slowly and deliberately veered his head round as though it worked on a hinge to see if his master was coming. John knew his ways. Three times would that remarkable old dog look round thus, and if the gun had not then arrived he would to a certainty run in and flush the birds. This was a rule that he never broke, for his patience had a fixed limit. On this occasion, however, John arrived before it was reached, and, jumping off his pony, cocked his gun and marched slowly up, full of happy expectation. On drew the dog, his eye cold and fixed, saliva dropping from his mouth, and his head and face, on which was frozen an extraordinary expression of instinctive ferocity, outstretched to their utmost limit.

He was right under the mimosa thorn now and up to his belly in the warm red grass. Where could the birds be? *Whirr!* and a great feathered shell seemed to have burst at his very feet. What a covey! twelve brace if there was a bird, and they had all been lying beak to beak in a space no bigger than a cart wheel. Up went John's

gun and off too, a little sooner than it should have done.

"Missed him clean! Now then for the left barrel." Same result. There, we will draw a veil over the profanity that ensued. A minute later and it was all over, and John and Pontac were regarding each other with mutual contempt and disgust.

"It was all you, you brute," said John to Pontac. "I thought you were going to run in, and you hurried me."

"Ugh!" said Pontac to John, or at least he looked it. "Ugh! you disgusting bad shot. What is the good of pointing for you? It's enough to make a dog sick."

The covey—or rather the collection of old birds, for this kind of partridge sometimes "packs" just before the breeding season—had scattered all about the place, and it was not long before Pontac found some of them; and this time John got one bird—and a beautiful great partridge he was too, with yellow legs—and missed another. Again Pontac pointed, and a brace rose. Bang! down goes one; bang! with the other barrel. Caught him, by Jove, just as he topped the stone. Hullo! Pontac is still on the point. Slip in two

more cartridges. Oh, a leash this time! bang! bang! and down come a brace of them—two brace of partridges without moving a yard.

Life has joys for all men, but it has, I verily believe, no joy to compare to the joy of the moderate shot and earnest sportsman when he has just killed half a dozen driven partridges without a miss, or ten rocketing pheasants with eleven cartridges, or, better still, a couple of woodcock right and left. Sweet to the politician are the cheers to announce the triumph of his cause and of himself; sweet to the desponding writer is the unexpected public recognition in the "Saturday Review" of talents with which nobody had previously been much impressed; sweet to all men is the light of women's eyes and the touch of women's lips. But though he have experienced all these things, to the true sportsman and the *moderate shot*, sweeter far is it to see the arched wings of the driven bird bent like Cupid's bow come flashing fast towards him, to feel the touch of the stock as it fits itself against the shoulder, and the kindly give of the trigger, and then, oh thrilling sight! to perceive the wonderful and yet awful change from life to death, the puff of feathers, and the hurtling passage of the dull

mass borne onward by its own force to fall twenty yards from where the shot struck it. Next session the politician will be hooted down, next year perhaps the "Saturday Review" will cut the happy writer to ribbons and decorate its columns with his fragments, next week you will have wearied of those sweet smiles, or, more likely still, they will be bestowed elsewhere. Vanity of vanities, my son, each and all of them! But if you are a true sportsman (yes, even though you be but a moderate shot), it will always be a glorious thing to go out shooting, and when you chance to shoot well earth holds no such joy as that which will glow in your honest breast (for all sportsmen are honest), and it remains to be proved if heaven does either. It is a grand sport, though the pity of it is that it should be such a cruel one.

Such was the pæan that John sang in his heart as he contemplated those fine partridges before lovingly transferring them to his bag. But his luck to-day was not destined to stop at partridges, for hardly had he ridden over the edge of the boulder-strewn side, and on to the flat tabletop of the great hill which covered some five hundred acres of land, before he perceived,

emerging from the shelter of a tuft of grass about a hundred and seventy yards away, nothing less than the tall neck and whiskered head of a large "pauw" or bustard.

Now it is quite useless to try and ride straight up to a bustard, and this he knew. The only thing to do is to excite his curiosity and fix his attention by moving round and round him in an ever-narrowing circle. Putting his pony to a canter, John proceeded to do this with a heart beating with excitement. Round and round he went; the "pauw" had vanished now, he was squatting in the tuft of grass. The last circle brought him to within seventy yards, and he did not dare risk it any more, so jumping off his pony he ran in towards the bird as hard as ever he could go. Before he had covered ten yards the "pauw" was rising, but they are heavy birds, and he was within forty yards before it was fairly on the wing. Then he pulled up and fired both barrels of No. 4 into it. Down it came, and, incautious man, he rushed forward in triumph without reloading his gun. Already was his hand outstretched to seize the prize, when, behold! the great wings stretched themselves out and the bird was flying away. John stood dancing upon

the veldt, but observing that it settled within a couple of hundred yards, ran back, mounted his pony, and pursued it. When he got near it it rose again, and flew this time a hundred yards only, and so it went on till at last he got within gun-shot of the king of birds and killed it.

By this time he was right across the mountain-top, and on the brink of the most remarkable chasm he had ever seen. The place was known as Lion's Kloof, or Leeuwen Kloof in Dutch, because three lions had once been penned up by a party of Boers and shot there. The chasm or gorge was between a quarter and half a mile long, about six hundred feet in width, and a hundred and fifty to a hundred and eighty feet deep. It evidently owed its origin to the action of running water, for at its head, just to the right of where John Niel stood, a little stream welling from hidden springs in the flat mountain-top trickled from stratum to stratum, forming a series of crystal pools and tiny waterfalls, till at last it reached the bottom of the mighty gorge, and pursued its way, half-hidden by the umbrella-topped mimosa and other thorns that were scattered about, through it to the plains beyond. Evidently this little stream was the parent of the

gulf it flowed down and through, but how many centuries of patient, never-ceasing flow, wondered John Niel, must have been necessary to the vast result before him? First centuries of saturation of the soil piled on and between the bed rocks that lay beneath it and jutted up through it, then centuries of floods caused by rain and perhaps by melting snows, to wash away the loosened mould; then centuries upon centuries more of flowing and of rainfall to wash the *débris* clean and complete the colossal work.

I say the rocks that jutted up through the soil, for the gulf was not clean cut. All along its sides, and here and there in its arena, stood up mighty columns or fingers of rock, not solid columns, but columns formed by huge boulders piled mason fashion one upon another, as though the Titans of some dead age had employed themselves in building them up, overcoming their tendency to fall by the mere crushing weight above, that kept them steady even when the wild breath of the storms came howling down the gorge and tried its strength against them. About a hundred paces from the near end of the chasm, some ninety or more feet in height, stood the most remarkable of these mighty pillars, to

which the remains at Stonehenge are but toys. It was formed of seven huge boulders, the largest, that at the bottom, about the size of a moderate cottage, and the smallest, that at the top, perhaps some eight or ten feet in diameter. These boulders were rounded like a cricket-ball—evidently through the action of water—and yet the hand of Nature had contrived to balance them, each one smaller than that beneath, the one upon the other, and to keep them so. But this was not always the case. For instance, a very similar mass that had risen on the near side of the perfect pillar had fallen, all except the two bottom stones, and the boulders that went to form it lay scattered about like monstrous petrified cannon-balls. One of these had split in two, and seated on it John discovered none other than Jess Croft, apparently engaged in sketching, looking very small and far off at the bottom of that vast gulf.

John got off his shooting pony, and looking about him perceived that it was possible to descend by following the course of the stream and clambering down the natural steps it had cut in the rocky bed. Throwing the reins over the pony's head, and leaving him with the dog

Pontac to stand and look about him as South African shooting ponies are accustomed to do, he put down his gun and game and proceeded to descend, pausing every now and again to admire the wild beauty of the scene and look at the hundred varieties of moss and ferns, the last mostly of the maiden-hair (*capilla veneris*) genus, that clothed every cranny and every rock where they could find roothold and get refreshment from the water or the spray of the cascades. As he drew near the bottom of the gorge he saw that near the borders of the stream, wherever the soil was moist, grew thousands upon thousands of white arum lilies, "pig lilies" they call them there, just now in full bloom. He had noticed these lilies from above, but there they had, owing to the distance, looked so small that he had taken them for everlastings or anemones. He could not see Jess now, for she was hidden by a bush that grows by the banks of the streams in South Africa in low-lying land, and which at certain seasons of the year is literally covered with masses of the most gorgeous scarlet bloom. His footsteps fell very softly on the moss and flowers, and when he got round the glorious-looking bush it was evident that she had not heard him, for

she was asleep. Her hat was off, but the bush shaded her, and her head had fallen forward over her sketching block and rested on her hand. A ray of light that came through the bush played upon her curling brown hair, and threw warm shadows on her white face and the white wrist and hand on which it rested.

John stood opposite to her and looked at her, and the old curiosity took possession of him to understand this feminine enigma. Many a man before him has been the victim of a like desire, and lived to regret that he did not leave it ungratified. It is not well to try and lift the curtain of the unseen, it is not well to call to heaven to show its glory, or to hell to give us touch and knowledge of its yawning fires. Knowledge comes soon enough; many of us will say that knowledge has come too soon and left us desolate. There is no bitterness like the bitterness of wisdom: so cried the great Koheleth, and so hath cried many a son of man following blindly on his path. Let us be thankful for the dark places of the earth—places where we may find rest and shadow, and the heavy sweetness of the night. Seek not after mysteries, O son of man, be content with the practical and the proved and the

broad light of the day; peep not, mutter not the words of awakening. Understand her who would be understood and is comprehensible to those who run, and for the others let them be, lest your fate should be as the fate of Eve, and as the fate of Lucifer, star of the morning. For here and there there is a human heart from which it is not wise to draw the veil—a heart in which many things slumber as undreamed dreams in the brain of the sleeper. Draw not the veil, whisper not the word of life in the silence where all things sleep, lest in that kindling breath of love and pain dim shapes arise, take form, and fright thee!

A minute or so might have passed when suddenly, and with a little start, Jess opened her great eyes, in which the shadow of darkness lay, and gazed at him.

“Oh!” she said with a little tremor, “is it you or is it my dream?”

“Don’t be afraid,” he answered cheerfully, “it is I—in the flesh.”

She covered her face with her hand for a moment, and then withdrew it, and he noticed that her eyes had changed curiously in that moment. They were still large and beautiful as

they always were, but there was a change. Just now they had seemed as though her soul were looking through them. Doubtless it was because the pupils were enlarged by sleep.

"Your dream! What dream?" he asked, laughing.

"Never mind," she answered in a quiet sort of way that excited his curiosity more than ever. "It was about this Kloof— and you—but 'dreams are foolishness.'"

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORM BREAKS.

"Do you know, you are a very odd person, Miss Jess," John said presently, with a little laugh. "I don't think you can have a happy mind."

She looked up. "A happy mind?" she said. "Who *can* have a happy mind? Nobody who can feel. Supposing," she went on after a pause—"supposing one puts oneself and one's own little interests and joys and sorrows quite away, how is it possible to be happy, when one feels the breath of human misery beating on one's face, and sees the tide of sorrow and suffering creeping up to one's feet? One may be on a rock oneself and out of the path of it, till the spring floods or the hurricane wave comes to sweep one away, or one may be afloat upon it: whichever it is, it is quite impossible, if one has any heart, to be indifferent to it."

"Then only the indifferent are happy?"

"Yes, the indifferent and the selfish; but, after

all, it is the same thing: indifference is the perfection of selfishness."

"I am afraid that there must be lots of selfishness in the world, for there is certainly plenty of happiness, all evil things notwithstanding. I should have said that happiness comes from goodness and from a sound digestion."

Jess shook her head as she answered, "I may be wrong, but I don't see how anybody who feels can be quite happy in a world of sickness, suffering, slaughter, and death. I saw a Kafir woman die yesterday, and her children crying over her. She was a poor creature and had a rough lot, but she loved her life, and her children loved her. Who can be happy and thank God for his creation when he has just seen such a thing? But there, Captain Niel, my ideas are very crude, and I dare say very wrong, and everybody has thought them before: at any rate, I am not going to inflict them on you. What is the use of it?" and she went on with a laugh: "what is the use of anything? The same old thoughts passing through the same human minds from year to year and century to century, just as the same clouds float across the same blue sky. The clouds are born in the sky, and the thoughts are born in the brain,

and they both end in tears and re-arise in blinding, bewildering mist, and this is the beginning and end of thoughts and clouds. They arise out of the blue; they overshadow and break into storms and tears, and then they are drawn up into the blue again, and the whole thing begins afresh."

"So you don't think that one can be happy in the world?" he asked.

"I did not say that—I never said that. I do think that happiness is possible. It is possible if one can love somebody so hard that one can quite forget oneself and everything else except that person, and it is possible if one can sacrifice oneself for others. There is no true happiness outside of love and self-sacrifice, or rather outside of love, for it includes the other. That is gold, and all the rest is gilt."

"How do you know that?" he asked quickly. "You have never been in love."

"No," she answered, "I have never been in love like that, but all the happiness I have had in my life has come to me from loving. I believe that love is the secret of the world: it is like the philosopher's stone they used to look for, and almost as hard to find, but when one finds it it

turns everything to gold. Perhaps," she went on with a little laugh, "when the angels left the earth they left us love behind, that by it and through it we may climb up to them again. It is the one thing that lifts us above the brutes. Without love man is a brute, and nothing but a brute; with love he draws near to God. When everything else falls away the love will endure because it cannot die while there is any life, if it is true love, for it is immortal. Only it must be true—you see it must be true."

He had got through her reserve now; the ice of her manner broke up beneath the warmth of her words, and her usually impassive face had caught the life and light from the eyes above, and acquired a certain beauty of its own. He looked at it, and realised something of the untaught and ill-regulated intensity and depth of the nature of this curious girl. He caught her eyes and they moved him strangely, though he was not an emotional man, and was too old to experience spasmodic thrills at the chance glances of a pretty woman. He went towards her, looking at her curiously.

"It would be worth living to be loved like that," he said, more to himself than to her.

She did not answer, but she let her eyes rest on his. Indeed, she did more, for she put her soul into them and gazed and gazed till John Niel felt as though he were being mesmerised. And as she did so there rose up in her breast a knowledge that if she willed it she could gain this man's heart and hold it against all the world, for her nature was stronger than his nature, and her mind, untrained as it was, encompassed his mind and could pass over it and beat it down as the wind beats down a tossing sea. All this she learnt in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye: she could not tell how she knew it, but she did know it as surely as she knew that the blue sky stretched overhead, and, what is more, he—for the moment, at any rate—knew it too. It came on her as a shock and a revelation, like the tidings of a great joy or grief, and for a moment left her heart empty of all things else.

She dropped her eyes suddenly.

"I think," she said quietly, "that we have been talking a great deal of nonsense, and that I want to finish my sketch."

He got up and left her, for he had to get home, saying as he did so that he thought there was a storm coming up; the air was so quiet,

and the wind had fallen as it does before an African tempest, and presently on looking round she saw him slowly climbing the precipitous ascent to the table-land above.

It was a glorious afternoon, such as one sometimes gets in the African spring, although it was so intensely still. Everywhere were the proofs and evidences of life. The winter was over, and now, from the sadness and sterility of its withered age, sprung young and lovely summer clad in sunshine, bediamonded with dew, and fragrant with the breath of flowers. Jess lay back and looked up into the infinite depths above. How blue they were, and how measureless! She could not see the angry clouds that lay like visible omens on the horizon. See there, miles above her, was one tiny circling speck. It was a vulture, watching her from his airy heights and descending a little to see if she was dead, or only sleeping.

Involuntarily she shuddered. The bird of death reminded her of Death himself also hanging high up there in the blue and waiting his opportunity to fall upon the sleeper. Then her eyes fell upon a bough of the glorious flowering bush under which she lay. It was not more than

four feet above her head, but she was so still and motionless that a jewelled honeysucker came and hovered over the flowers, darting from one to another like a many-coloured flash. Thence her glance travelled to the great column of boulders that towered up above her, and that seemed to say, "I am very old. I have seen many springs and many winters, and have looked down on many sleeping maids, and where are they now? All dead—all dead," and an old baboon in the rocks with startling suddenness barked out "*all dead*" in answer.

Around her were the blooming lilies and the lustiness of springing life; the heavy air was sweet with the odour of ferns and the mimosa flower. The running water splashed and musically fell; the sunlight lay in golden bars athwart the shade, like the memory of happy days in the grey vista of a life; away in the cliffs yonder, the rock-doves were preparing to nest by hundreds, and waking the silence with their cooing and the flutter of their wings. Even the grim old eagle perched on the pinnacle of the rock was pruning himself, contentedly happy in the knowledge that his mate had laid an egg in that dark corner of the cliff. Everything rejoiced and cried aloud

that summer was at hand and that it was time to bloom and love and nest. Soon it would be winter again, when things died, and next summer other things would live under the sun, and they perchance would be forgotten. That was what they seemed to say.

And as she lay and heard, her youthful blood, drawn by Nature's magnetic force, as the moon draws the tide, rose in her veins like the sap in the budding trees, and stirred her virginal serenity. All the bodily natural part of her caught the tones of Nature's happy voice that bade her break her bands, live and love, and be a woman. And lo! the spirit within her answered to it, and flung wide her bosom's doors, and of a sudden, as it were, something quickened and lived in her heart that was of her and yet had its own life—a life apart; something that sprung from her and another, and which would always be with her now and could never die; and she rose pale and trembling, as a woman trembles at the first stirring of the child that she shall bear, and clung to the flowery bough of the beautiful bush above and then sank down again, feeling that the spirit of her girlhood had departed from her, and another angel had entered there; knew that she

loved with heart and soul and body, and was a very woman.

She had called to Love as the wretched call to Death, and Love had come in his strength and possessed her utterly; and now for a little while she was afraid to pass into the shadow of his wings, as the wretched who call to Death fear him when they feel his icy fingers. But the fear passed, and the great joy and the new consciousness of power and of identity that the inspiration of a true passion gives to some strong deep natures remained, and after a while she prepared to make her way home across the mountain-top, feeling as though she were another woman. But still she did not go, but lay there with closed eyes and drank of this new intoxicating wine. So absorbed was she that she did not notice that the birds had ceased to call, and that the eagle had fled away for shelter. She was not aware of the great and solemn hush that had taken the place of the merry voice of beast and bird and preceded the breaking of the gathered storm.

At last as she rose to go she opened her dark eyes, which had been for the most part shut while this great change was passing over her, and with a natural impulse turned to look once more on

the place where her happiness had found her, and then sank down again with a little exclamation. Where was the light and the glory and all the happiness of the life that moved and grew around her? Gone, and in its place darkness and rising mist and deep and ominous shadows. As she lay and thought, the sun had sunk behind the hill and left the great gulf nearly dark, and, as is common in South Africa, the heavy storm-cloud had crept across the blue sky and sealed up the light from above. A drear wind came moaning up the gorge from the plains beyond; the heavy rain-drops began to fall one by one; the lightning flickered fitfully in the belly of the advancing cloud. The storm that John had feared was upon her.

Then came a dreadful hush. Jess had recovered herself by now, and, knowing what to expect, snatched up her sketching-block and hurried into the shelter of a little cave hollowed by water in the side of the cliff. And now with a rush of ice-cold air the tempest burst. Down came the rain in a sheet; and then flash upon flash gleaming fiercely through the vapour-laden air; and roar upon roar echoing in the rocky cavities in volumes of fearful sound. Then another pause and space

of utter silence, followed by a blaze of light that dazed and blinded her, and suddenly one of the piled-up columns to her left swayed to and fro like a poplar in a breeze, and fell headlong with a crash that almost mastered the awful crackling of the thunder overhead and the shrieking of the baboons scared from their crannies in the cliff. Down it came beneath the stroke of the fiery sword, the brave old pillar that had lasted out so many centuries, sending clouds of dust and fragments high up into the blinding rain, and carrying awe and wonder into the heart of the girl who watched its fall. Away rolled the storm as quickly as it had come, with a sound like the passing of the artillery of an embattled host, and then a grey rain set in, blotting out the outlines of everything, like an enduring absorbing grief, dulling the edge and temper of a life. Through it Jess, scared and wet to the skin, managed to climb up the natural steps, now made almost impassable by the prevailing gloom and the rush of the water from the table-top of the mountain, and so on across the sodden plain, down the rocky path on the farther side, past the little walled-in cemetery with its four red gums planted at its corners, in which a stranger who had died at

Mooifontein lay buried, and so, just as the darkness of the wet night came down like a cloud, home at last. At the backdoor stood her old uncle with a lantern.

"Is that you, Jess?" he called out in his stentorian tones. "Lord! what a sight!" as she emerged, her sodden dress clinging to her slight form, her hands bleeding with clambering over the rocks, her curling hair which had broken loose hanging down her back and half covering her face.

"Lord! what a sight!" he ejaculated again. "Why, Jess, where have you been? Captain Niel has gone out to look for you with the Kafirs."

"I have been sketching in Leeuwen Kloof, and got caught in the storm. There, uncle, let me pass, I want to get these wet things off. It is a bitter night," and off she ran to her room, leaving a long trail of water behind her as she passed. The old man entered the house, shut the door, and blew out the lantern.

"Now, what is it she reminds me of?" he said aloud as he groped his way down the passage to the sitting-room. "Ah, I know, that night when she first came here out of the rain leading Bessie by the hand. What can the girl have been

thinking of, not to see the thunder coming up? She ought to know the signs of the weather here by now. Dreaming, I suppose, dreaming. She's an odd woman, Jess, very." Perhaps he did not quite know how accurate his guess was, and how true the conclusion he drew from it. Certainly she had been dreaming, and she was an odd woman.

Meanwhile Jess was rapidly changing her clothes and removing the traces of her struggle with the elements. But of that other struggle she had gone through she could not remove the traces. They and the love that arose out of it would endure as long as she endured. It was her former self that had been cast off in it and that now lay behind her, an empty and meaningless thing like the shapeless pile of garments. It was all very strange. So he had gone to look for her and had not found her. She was glad that he had gone. It made her happy to think of him searching and calling in the wet and the night. She was only a woman, and it was natural that she should feel thus. By-and-by he would come back and find her clothed and in her right mind and ready to greet him. She was glad that he had not seen her, wet, dishevelled, and shapeless.

A woman looks so unpleasant like that. It might have turned him against her. Men like women to look nice and clean and pretty. That gave her an idea. She turned to her glass and, holding the light above her head, studied her own face attentively in it. She was a woman with as little vanity in her composition as it is possible for a woman to have, and she had not till now given her personal looks much consideration. They had not been of great importance to her in the Wakkerstroom district of the Transvaal. But now all of a sudden they became very important; and so she stood and looked at her own wonderful eyes, at the masses of curling brown hair still damp and shining from the rain, at the curious pallid face and clear-cut determined mouth.

“If it was not for my eyes and hair, I should be very ugly,” she said to herself aloud. “If only I were beautiful like Bessie, now.” The thought of her sister gave her another idea. What if he were to prefer Bessie? Now she thought of it, he had been very attentive to Bessie. A feeling of dreadful doubt and jealousy passed through her, for women like Jess know what jealousy is in its pain. Supposing that it was all in vain, supposing that what she had to-day given—given with both

hands once and for all, so that she could not take it back, had been given to a man who loved another woman, and that woman her own dear sister! Supposing that the fate of her love was to be like water falling unalteringly on the hard rock that heeds it not and retains it not! True, the water wears the rock away; but could she be satisfied with that? She could master him, she knew; even if things were so, she could win him to herself, she had read it in his eyes that afternoon; but could she, who had promised to her dead mother to cherish and protect her sister, whom till this afternoon she had loved better than anything in the world, and whom she still loved more dearly than her life—could she, if it should happen to be thus, rob that sister of her lover? And if it should be so, what would her life be like? It would be like the great pillar after the lightning had smitten it, a pile of shattered smoking fragments, a very heaped-up débris of a life. She could feel it even now. No wonder she sat there upon the little white bed holding her hand against her heart and feeling terribly afraid.

Just then she heard John's footsteps in the hall.

Jess. I.



"I can't find her," he said in an anxious tone to someone as she rose, taking her candle with her, and left the room. The light from the candle fell full upon his face and dripping clothes. It was white and anxious, and she was glad to see the anxiety.

"Oh, thank God! here you are!" he said, catching her hand. "I began to think you were quite lost. I have been right down the Kloof after you, and got a nasty fall over it."

"It is very good of you," she said in a low voice, and again their eyes met, and again the glance thrilled him. There was such a wonderful light in Jess's eyes that night.

Half an hour afterwards they sat down as usual to supper. Bessie did not put in an appearance till it was a quarter over, and then sat very silent through it. Jess narrated her adventure in the Kloof, and everybody listened, but nobody said much. There was a sort of shadow over the house that evening, or perhaps it was that each of the party was thinking of his own affairs. After supper old Silas Croft began talking about the political state of the country, which gave him uneasiness. He said that he believed the Boers really meant to rebel against the Govern-

ment this time. Frank Muller had told him so, and he always knew what was going on. This announcement did not tend to raise anybody's spirits, and the evening passed as silently as the meal had done. At last Bessie got up, stretched her rounded arms, and said that she was tired and going to bed.

"Come into my room," she whispered to her sister as she passed. "I want to speak to you."

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

AFTER waiting a few minutes, Jess said "Good-night," and went straight to Bessie's room. Her sister had undressed, and was sitting on her bed, wrapped in a blue dressing-gown that suited her fair complexion admirably, and with a very desponding expression on her beautiful face. Bessie was one of those people who are easily elated and easily cast down.

Jess came up to her and kissed her.

"What is it, love?" she said. Her sister would never have divined the gnawing anxiety that was eating at her heart as she said it.

"Oh, Jess, I'm so glad that you have come. I do so want you to advise me—that is, to tell me what you think," and she paused.

"You must tell me what it is all about first, Bessie dear," she said, sitting down opposite to her in such a position that her face was shaded from the light. Bessie tapped her naked foot

against the matting with which the little room was carpeted. It was an exceedingly pretty foot.

"Well, dear old girl, it is just this—Frank Muller has been here to ask me to marry him."

"Oh," said Jess, with a sigh of relief. So that was all? She felt as though a ton-weight had been lifted from her heart. She had expected this bit of news for some time.

"He wanted me to marry him, and when I said I would not, he behaved like—like——"

"Like a Boer," suggested Jess.

"Like a *brute*," went on Bessie with emphasis.

"So you don't like Frank Muller?"

"Like him! I loathe the man. You don't know how I loathe him, with his handsome bad face and his cruel eyes. I always loathed him, and now I hate him too. But I will tell you all about it;" and she did, with many feminine comments and interpolations.

Jess sat quite still, and waited till she had finished.

"Well, dear," she said at last, "you are not going to marry him, and so there is an end of it. You can't detest the man more than I do. I have watched him for years," she went on, with rising anger, "and I tell you that Frank Muller

is a liar and a traitor. That man would betray his own father if he thought it to his interest to do so. He hates uncle—I am sure he does, although he pretends to be so fond of him. I am sure that he has tried often and often to stir up the Boers against him. Old Hans Coetzee told me that he denounced him to the Veld-Cornet as an ‘uitlander’ and a ‘verdomde Engelsmann’ about two years before the annexation, and tried to get him to persuade the Landdrost to report him as a law-breaker to the Raad; while all the time he was pretending to be so friendly. Then in the Sikukuni war it was Frank Muller who caused them to commandeer uncle’s two best waggons and the spans. He gave none himself, nothing but a couple of bags of meal. He is a wicked fellow, Bessie, and a dangerous fellow; but he has more brains and more power about him than any man in the Transvaal, and you will have to be very careful, or he will do us all a bad turn.”

“Ah!” said Bessie; “well, he can’t do much now that the country is English.”

“I am not so sure of that. I am not so sure that the country is going to stop English. You laugh at me for reading the home papers, but I

see things there that make me doubtful. The other party is in power now in England, and one does not know what they may do; you heard what uncle said to-night. They might give us up to the Boers. You must remember that we far-away people are only the counters with which they play their game."

"Nonsense, Jess," said Bessie indignantly. "Englishmen are not like that. When they say a thing, they stick to it."

"They used to, you mean," answered Jess with a shrug, and got up from her chair to go to bed.

Bessie began to fidget her white feet over one another.

"Stop a bit, Jess dear," she said. "I want to speak to you about something else."

Jess sat or rather dropped back into her chair, and her pale face turned paler than ever; but Bessie blushed rosy red and hesitated.

"It is about Captain Niel," she said at length.

"Oh," answered Jess with a little laugh, and her voice sounded cold and strange in her own ears. "Has he been following Frank Muller's example, and proposing to you too?"

"No-o," said Bessie, "but"—and here she

rose, and, sitting on a stool by her elder sister's chair, rested her forehead against her knee—"but I love him, and I *believe* that he loves me. This morning he told me that I was the prettiest woman he had seen at home or abroad, and the sweetest too; and do you know," she said, looking up and giving a happy little laugh, "I think he meant it."

"Are you joking, Bessie, or are you really in earnest?"

"In earnest! ah, but that I am, and I am not ashamed to say it. I fell in love with John Niel when he killed that cock ostrich. He looked so strong and savage as he fought with it. It is a fine thing to see a man put out all his strength. And then he is such a gentleman!—so different from the men we see round here. Oh yes, I fell in love with him at once, and I have got deeper and deeper in love with him ever since, and if he does not marry me I think that it will break my heart. There, that's the truth, Jess dear," and she dropped her golden head on to her sister's knees, and began to cry softly at the thought.

And the sister sat there on the chair, her hand hanging idly by her side, her white face set

and impassive as that of an Egyptian Sphinx, and the large eyes gazing far away through the window, against which the rain was beating—far away out into the night and the storm. She heard the surging of the storm, she heard her sister's weeping, her eyes perceived the dark square of the window through which they appeared to look, she could feel Bessie's head upon her knee—yes, she could see and hear and feel, and yet it seemed to her that she was *dead*. The lightning had fallen on her soul as it fell on the pillar of rock, and it was as the pillar was. And it had fallen so soon! there had been such a little span of happiness and hope! And so she sat, like a stony Sphinx, and Bessie wept softly before her, like a beautiful, breathing, loving human suppliant, and the two formed a picture and a contrast such as the student of human nature does not often get the chance of seeing.

It was the elder sister who spoke first after all.

"Well, dear," she said, "what are you crying about? You love Captain Niel, and you believe that he loves you. Surely there is nothing to cry about."

"Well, I don't know that there is," said Bessie,

more cheerfully; "but I was thinking how dreadful it would be if I lost him."

"I don't think that you need be afraid," said Jess; "and now, dear, I really must go to bed, I am so tired. Good-night, my dear; God bless you! I think that you have made a very wise choice. Captain Niel is a man whom any woman might love, and be proud of loving."

In another minute she was in her room, and there her composure left her, for she was but a loving woman after all. She flung herself upon her bed, and, hiding her face in the pillow, burst into a paroxysm of weeping—a very different thing from Bessie's gentle tears. Her grief absolutely convulsed her, and she pushed the bed-clothes against her mouth to prevent the sound of it penetrating the partition wall and reaching John Niel's ears, for his room was next to hers. Even in the midst of her suffering the thought of the irony of the thing forced itself into her mind. There, separated from her only by a few inches of lath and plaster and some four or five feet of space, was the man for whom she mourned thus, and yet he was as ignorant of it as though he were thousands of miles away. Sometimes at

such acute crises in our lives the limitations of our physical nature do strike us in this sort of way. It is strange to be so near and yet so far, and it brings the absolute and utter loneliness of every created being home to the mind in a manner that is forcible and at times almost terrible. John Niel going composedly to sleep, his mind happy with the recollection of those two right and left shots, and Jess, lying on her bed, six feet away, and sobbing out her stormy heart over him, are after all but types of what is continually going on in this remarkable world. How often do we understand one another's grief? and, when we do, by what standard can we measure it? More especially is comprehension rare if we happen to be the original cause of the trouble. Do we think of the feelings of the beetles it is our painful duty to crush into nothingness? Not at all. If we have any compunctions, they are quickly absorbed in the pride of our capture. And more often still, as in the present case, we set our foot upon the poor victim by pure accident or venial carelessness.

Presently he was fast asleep, and she, her paroxysm past, was walking up and down, down and up, her little room, her bare feet falling

noiselessly on the carpeting as she strove to wear out the first bitterness of her woe. Oh that it lay in her power to recall the past few days! Oh that she had never seen his face, that must now be ever before her eyes! But for her there was no such possibility, and she felt it. She knew her own nature well. Her heart had spoken, and the word it said must roll on continually through the spaces of her mind. Who can recall the spoken word, and who can set a limit to its echoes? It is not so with most women, but here and there may be found a nature where it is so. Spirits like this poor girl's are too deep, and partake too much of a divine immutability, to shift and suit themselves to the changing circumstances of a fickle world. They have no middle course; they cannot halt half-way; they set all their fortune on a throw. And when the throw is lost their hearts are broken, and their happiness passes away like a swallow.

For in such a nature love rises like the wind on the quiet breast of some far sea. None can say whence it comes or whither it blows; but there it is, lashing the waters to a storm, so that they roll in thunder all the long day through, throwing their white arms on high, as they clasp

at the evasive air, till the darkness that is death comes down and covers them.

What is the interpretation of it? Why does the great wind stir the deep waters? It does but ripple the shallow pool as it passes, for shallowness can but ripple and throw up shadows. We cannot tell, but this we know—that deep things only can be deeply moved. It is the penalty of depth and greatness; it is the price they pay for the divine privilege of suffering and sympathy. The shallow pools, the looking-glasses of our little life, know nought, feel nought. Poor things! they can but ripple and reflect. But the deep sea, in its torture, may perchance catch some echo of God's voice sounding down the driving gale; and, as it lifts itself and tosses up its waves in agony, may perceive a glow, flowing from a celestial sky that is set beyond the horizon that bounds its being.

Suffering, or rather mental suffering, is a prerogative of greatness, and even here there lies an exquisite joy at its core. For everything has its compensations. Nerves such as these can thrill with a high happiness, that will sweep unfelt over the mass of men. Thus he who is stricken with grief at the sight of the world's misery—as all

great and good men must be—is at times lifted up with joy by catching some faint gleam of the almighty purpose that underlies it all. So it was with the Son of Man in His darkest hours; the Spirit that enabled Him to compass out the measure of the world's suffering and sin enabled Him also, knowing their purposes, to gaze beyond them; and thus it is, too, with those deep-hearted children of His race, who partake, however dimly, of His divinity.

And so, even in this hour of her darkest bitterness and grief, a gleam of comfort struggled to Jess's breast just as the first ray of dawn was struggling through the stormy night. She would sacrifice herself to her sister—that she had determined on; and hence came that cold gleam of happiness, for there is happiness in self-sacrifice, whatever the cynical may say. At first her woman's nature had risen in rebellion against the thought. Why should she throw her life away? She had as good a right to him as Bessie, and she knew that by the strength of her own hand she could hold him against Bessie in all her beauty, however far things had gone between them; and she believed, as a jealous woman is prone to do, that they had gone much farther than they had.

But by-and-by, as she pursued that weary march, her better self rose up, and mastered the promptings of her heart. Bessie loved him, and Bessie was weaker than she, and less suited to bear pain, and she had sworn to her dying mother—for Bessie had been her mother's darling—to promote her happiness, and, come what would, to comfort and protect her by every means in her power. It was a wide oath, and she was only a child when she took it, but it bound her conscience none the less, and surely it covered this. Besides, she dearly loved her—far, far more than she loved herself. No, Bessie should have her lover, and she should never know what it had cost her to give him up; and as for herself, well, she must go away like a wounded buck, and hide till she got well—or died.

She laughed a drear little laugh, and went and brushed her hair just as the broad lights of the dawn came streaming across the misty veldt. But she did not look at her face again in the glass; she cared no more about it now. Then she threw herself down to sleep the sleep of utter exhaustion before it was time to go out again and face the world and her new sorrow.

Poor Jess! Love's young dream had not over-

shadowed her for long. It had tarried just three hours. But it had left other dreams behind.

"Uncle," said Jess that morning to old Silas Croft as he stood by the kraal-gate, where he had been counting out the sheep—an operation requiring great quickness of eye, and on the accurate performance of which he greatly prided himself.

"Yes, yes, my dear, I know what you are going to say. It was very neatly done; it isn't everybody who can count out six hundred running hungry sheep without a mistake. But then, I oughtn't to say too much, for you see I have been at it for fifty years, in the old colony and here. Now, many a man would get fifty sheep wrong. There's Niel now——"

"Uncle," said she, wincing a little at the name, as a horse with a sore back winces at the touch of the saddle, "it wasn't about the sheep that I was going to speak to you. I want you to do me a favour."

"A favour? Why, God bless the girl, how pale you look!—not but what you are always pale. Well, what is it now?"

"I want to go up to Pretoria by the post-cart

that leaves Wakkerstroom to-morrow afternoon, and to stop for a couple of months with my school-fellow, Jane Neville. I have often promised to go, and I have never gone."

"Well, I never!" said the old man. "My stay-at-home Jess wanting to go away, and without Bessie, too! What is the matter with you?"

"I want a change, uncle—I do indeed. I hope you won't thwart me in this."

Her uncle looked at her steadily with his keen grey eyes.

"Humph!" he said; "you want to go away, and there's an end of it. Best not ask too many questions where a maid is concerned. Very well, my dear, go if you like, though I shall miss you."

"Thank you, uncle," she said, and kissed him, and then turned and went.

Old Croft took off his broad hat and polished his bald head with a red pocket-handkerchief.

"There's something up with that girl," he said aloud to a lizard that had crept out of the crevices of the stone wall to bask in the sun. "I am not such a fool as I look, and I say that there is something wrong with her. She is odder than ever," and he hit viciously at the lizard

with his stick, whereon it promptly bolted into its crack, returning presently to see if the irate "human" had departed.

"However," he soliloquised as he made his way up to the house, "I am glad that it was not Bessie. I couldn't bear, at my time of life, to part with Bessie, even for a couple of months."

CHAPTER VIII.

JESS GOES TO PRETORIA.

THAT day, at dinner, Jess suddenly announced that she was going on the morrow to Pretoria to see Jane Neville.

"To see Jane Neville!" said Bessie, opening her blue eyes wide. "Why, it was only last month you said that you did not care about Jane Neville now, because she had grown so vulgar. Don't you remember when she stopped here on her way down to Natal last year, and held up her fat hands, and said, 'Ah, Jess—Jess is a *genius*! It is a privilege to know her'? And then she wanted you to quote Shakespeare to that lump of a brother of hers, and you told her that if she did not hold her tongue she would not enjoy the privilege much longer. And now you want to go and stop with her for two months! Well, Jess, you are odd. And, what's more, I think it is very unkind of you to go away for so long."

To all of which prattle Jess said nothing, but merely reiterated her determination to go.

John, too, was astonished and, to tell the truth, not a little disgusted. Since the previous day, when he had that talk with her in Lion Kloof, Jess had assumed a clearer and more definite interest in his eyes. Before that she had been an enigma; now he had guessed enough about her to make him anxious to know more. Indeed, he had not perhaps realised how strong and definite his interest was till he heard that she was going away for a long period. Suddenly it struck him that the farm would be very dull without this interesting woman moving about the place in her silent, resolute kind of way. Bessie was, no doubt, delightful and charming to look on, but she had not got her sister's brains and originality; and John Niel was sufficiently above the ordinary run to thoroughly appreciate intellect and originality in a woman, instead of standing aghast at it. She interested him intensely, to say the least of it, and, man-like, he felt exceedingly put out, and even sulky, at the idea of her departure. He looked at her in remonstrance, and even, in awkwardness begotten of his irritation, knocked down the vinegar cruet

and made a mess upon the table; but she evaded his eyes and took no notice of the vinegar. Then, feeling that he had done all that in him lay, he went to see about the ostriches; first of all hanging about a little to see if Jess would come out, which she did not. Indeed, he saw nothing more of her till supper time. Bessie told him that she said she was busy packing; but, as one can only take twenty pounds weight of luggage in a post-cart, this did not quite convince him that it was so in fact.

At supper Jess was, if possible, even more quiet than she had been at dinner. After it was over he asked her to sing, but she declined, saying that she had given up singing for the present, and persisting in her statement in spite of the chorus of remonstrance it aroused. The birds only sing whilst they are mating; and it is, by the way, a curious thing, and suggestive of the theory that the same great principles pervade all nature, that Jess, now that her trouble had overtaken her, and that she had lost her love which had suddenly sprung from her heart—full-grown and clad in power as Athena sprang from the head of Jove—had no further inclination to use her divine gift of song. It probably was no-

thing more than a coincidence, but it was a curious one.

The arrangement was, that on the morrow Jess was to be driven in the Cape cart to Martinus-Wesselstroom, more commonly called Wakkerstroom, and there catch the post-cart, which was timed to leave the town at mid-day, though when it would leave was quite another matter. Post-carts are not particular to a day or so in the Transvaal.

Old Silas Croft was going to drive her with Bessie, who had some shopping to do in Wakkerstroom, as ladies sometimes have; but at the last moment the old man got a premonitory twinge of the rheumatism to which he was a martyr, and could not go; so, of course, John volunteered, and, though Jess raised some difficulties, Bessie furthered the idea, and in the end his offer was accepted.

Accordingly, at half-past eight on a beautiful morning up came the tented cart, with its two massive wheels, stout stinkwood disselboom, and four spirited young horses; to the heads of which the Hottentot Jantjé, assisted by the Zulu Mouti, clad in the sweet simplicity of a moocha, a few feathers in his wool, and a horn snuff-box stuck

through the fleshy part of the ear, hung grimly on. In they got—John first, then Bessie next to him, then Jess. Next Jantjé scrambled up behind; and after some preliminary backing and plunging, and showing a disposition to twine themselves affectionately round the orange-trees, off went the horses at a hand gallop, and away swung the cart after them, in a fashion that would have frightened anybody, not accustomed to that mode of progression, pretty well out of his wits. As it was, John had as much as he could do to keep the four horses together and to prevent them from bolting, and this alone, to say nothing of the rattling and jolting of the vehicle over the uneven track, was sufficient to put a stop to any attempt at conversation.

Wakkerstroom was about eighteen miles from Mooifontein, a distance that they covered well within the two hours. Here the horses were outspanned at the hotel, and John went into the house whence the post-cart was to start and booked Jess's seat, and then joined the ladies at the "Kantoor" or store where they were shopping. After the shopping was done, they went back to the inn together and had some dinner; by which time the Hottentot driver of the cart began to

tune up lustily, but unmelodiously, on a bugle to inform intending passengers that it was time to start. Bessie was out of the room at the moment, and, with the exception of a peculiarly dirty-looking coolie waiter, there was nobody about.

"How long are you going to be away, Miss Jess?" asked John.

"Two months, more or less, Captain Niel."

"I am very sorry that you are going," he said earnestly. "It will be very dull at the farm without you."

"There will be Bessie for you to talk to," she answered, turning her face to the window, and affecting to watch the inspanning of the post-cart in the yard on to which it looked.

"Captain Niel!" she said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Mind you look after Bessie while I am away. Listen! I am going to tell you something. You know Frank Muller?"

"Yes, I know him, and a very disagreeable fellow he is."

"Well, he threatened Bessie the other day, and he is a man who is quite capable of carrying out a threat. I can't tell you anything more

about it, but I want you to promise me to protect Bessie if any occasion for it should arise. I do not know that it will, but it might. Will you promise?"

"Of course I will; I would do a great deal more than that if you asked me to, Jess," he answered tenderly, for now that she was going away he felt curiously drawn towards her, and was anxious to show it.

"Never mind me," she said, with an impatient little movement. "Bessie is sweet enough and lovely enough to be looked after for her own sake, I should think."

Before he could say any more, in came Bessie herself, saying that the driver was waiting, and they went out to see her sister off.

"Don't forget your promise," Jess whispered to him, bending down as he helped her into the cart, so low that her lips almost touched him and her breath rested for a second on his cheek like the ghost of a kiss.

In another moment the sisters had embraced each other, tenderly enough; the driver had sounded once more on his awful bugle, and away went the cart at full gallop, bearing with it Jess, two other passengers, and Her Majesty's mails.

John and Bessie stood for a moment watching its mad career, as it went splashing and banging down the straggling street towards the wide plains beyond, and then turned to enter the inn again and prepare for their homeward drive. As they did so, an old Boer, named Hans Coetzee, with whom John was already slightly acquainted, came up, and, extending an enormously big and thick hand, bid them "Gooden daag." Hans Coetzee was a very favourable specimen of the better sort of Boer, and really came more or less up to the ideal picture that is so often drawn of that "simple pastoral people." He was a very large stout man, with a fine open face and a pair of kindly eyes. John, looking at him, guessed that he could not weigh less than seventeen stone, and he was well within the mark at that.

"How are you, Captein?" he said in English, for he could talk English well, "and how do you like the Transvaal?—must not call it South African Republic now, you know, for that's treason," and his eye twinkled merrily.

"I like it very much, Meinheer," said John.

"Ah, yes, it's a beautiful veldt, especially about here—no horse sickness, no 'blue tongue,'*

* A disease that is very fatal to sheep.

and a good strong grass for the cattle. And you must find yourself very snug at Om [Uncle] Croft's there; it's the nicest place in the district, with the ostriches and all. Not that I hold with ostriches in this veldt; they are well enough in the old colony, but they won't breed here—at least, not as they should do. I tried them once and I know; oh, yes, I know."

"Yes, it's a very fine country, Meinheer. I have been all over the world almost, and I never saw a finer."

"You don't say so, now! Almighty, what a thing it is to have travelled! Not that I should like to travel myself. I think that the Lord meant us to stop in the place He has made for us. But it is a fine country, and" (dropping his voice) "I think it is a finer country than it used to be."

"You mean that the veldt has got 'tame,' Meinheer?"

"Nay, nay. I mean that the land is English now," he answered mysteriously, "and though I dare not say so among my volk, I hope that it will keep English. When I was Republican, I was Republican, and it was good in some ways, the Republic. There was so little to pay in taxes, and we knew how to manage the black folk; but

now I am English, I am English. I know the English Government means good money and safety, and if there isn't a 'Raad' [assembly] now, well, what does it matter? Almighty, how they used to talk there!—clack, clack, clack! just like an old black koran [species of bustard] at sunset. And where did they run the waggon of the Republic to—Burgers and those damned Hollanders of his, and the rest of them? Why, into the sluit—into a sluit with peaty banks; and there it would have stopped till now, or till the flood came down and swept it away, if old Shepstone—ah! what a tongue that man has, and how fond he is of the kinderchies! [little children]—had not come and pulled it out again. But look here, Captein, the volk round here don't think like that. It's the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement' here and the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement' there, and 'bymakaars' [meetings] here and 'bymakaars' there. Silly folk, they all run one after the other like sheep. But there it is, Captein, and I tell you there will be fighting before long, and then our people will shoot those poor rooibaatjes [red jackets] of yours like buck and take the land back. Poor things! I could weep when I think of it."

John smiled at this melancholy prognostication, and was about to explain what a poor show all the Boers in the Transvaal would make in front of a few British regiments, when he was astonished by a sudden change in his friend's manner. Dropping his enormous paw on to his shoulder, Coetzee broke into a burst of somewhat forced merriment, the cause of which was, though John did not guess it at the moment, that he had just perceived Frank Muller, who was in Wakkerstroom with a waggonload of corn to grind at the mill, standing within five yards, and apparently intensely interested in flipping at the flies with a cowrie made of the tail of a vilderbeeste, but in reality listening to Coetzee's talk with all his ears.

"Ha, ha! 'nef'" [nephew], said old Coetzee to the astonished John, "no wonder you like Mooifontein—there are other mooi [pretty] things there beside the water. How often do you 'opsit' [sit up at night] with Uncle Croft's pretty girl, eh? I'm not quite as blind as an antbear yet. I saw her blush when you spoke to her just now. I saw her. Well, well, it is a pretty game for a young man, isn't it, 'nef' Frank?" (this was addressed to Muller). "I'll be bound the Captein here

‘burns a long candle’ with pretty Bessie every night, eh, Frank? I hope you ain’t jealous, ‘nef’? My vrouw told me some time ago that you were sweet in that direction yourself;” and he stopped at last, out of breath, and looked anxiously towards Muller for an answer, while John, who had been somewhat overwhelmed at this flow of bucolic chaff, gave a sigh of relief. As for Muller, he behaved in a curious manner. Instead of laughing, as the jolly old Boer had intended that he should, he had, although Coetzee could not see it, been turning blacker and blacker; and now that the flow of language ceased, he, with a savage ejaculation which John could not catch, but which he appeared to throw at his (John’s) head, turned on his heel and went off towards the courtyard of the inn.

“Almighty!” said old Hans, wiping his face with a red cotton pocket-handkerchief; “I have put my foot into a big hole. That stink-cat Muller heard all that I was saying to you, and I tell you he will save it up and save it up, and one day he will bring it all out to the volk and call me a traitor to the ‘land’ and ruin me. I know him. He knows how to balance a long stick on his little finger so that the ends keep even. Oh,

yes, he can ride two horses at once, and blow hot and blow cold. He is a devil of a man, a devil of a man! And what did he mean by swearing at you like that? Is it about the missie [girl], I wonder? Almighty! who can say? Ah! that reminds me—though I'm sure I don't know why it should—the Kafirs tell me that there is a big herd of buck—vilderbeeste and blesbok—on my outlying place about an hour and a half [ten miles] from Mooifontein. Can you hold a rifle, Captein? You look like a bit of a hunter."

"Oh, yes, Meinheer!" said John, delighted at the prospect of some shooting.

"Ah, I thought so. All you English are sportsmen, though you don't know how to kill buck. Well now, you take Om Croft's light Scotch cart and two good horses, and come over to my place—not to-morrow, for my wife's cousin is coming to see us, and an old cat she is, but rich; she has a thousand pounds in gold in the waggon-box under her bed—nor the next day, for it is the Lord's day, and one can't shoot creatures on the Lord's day—but Monday, yes, Monday. You be there by eight o'clock, and you shall see how to kill vilderbeeste. Almighty! now what can that jackal Frank Muller have meant? Ah! he is the devil

of a man," and, shaking his head ponderously, the jolly old Boer departed, and presently John saw him riding away upon a fat little shooting-pony that cannot have weighed much more than himself, and that yet cantered away with him on his fifteen-mile journey as though he were but a feather weight.

CHAPTER IX.

JANTJÉ'S STORY.

SHORTLY after the old Boer had gone, John went into the yard of the hotel to see to the in-spanning of the Cape cart, when his attention was at once arrested by the sight of a row in active progress—at least, from the crowd of Kafirs and idlers and the angry sounds and curses that proceeded from them, he judged that it was a row. Nor was he wrong about it. In the corner of the yard, close by the stable-door, surrounded by the aforesaid crowd, stood Frank Muller; a heavy sjambock in his raised hand above his head, as though in the act to strike. Before him, a very picture of drunken fury, his lips drawn up like a snarling dog's so that the two lines of his white teeth gleamed like polished ivory in the sunlight, his small eyes all shot with blood and his face working convulsively, was the Hottentot Jantjé. Nor was this all. Across his face was a blue wheal where the whip had fallen, and in

his hand a heavy white-handled knife which he always carried.

"Hullo! what is all this?" said John, shouldering his way through the crowd.

"The swartsel [black creature] has stolen my horse's forage and given it to yours!" shouted Muller, who was evidently almost off his head with rage, making an attempt to hit Jantjé with the whip as he spoke. The latter avoided the blow by jumping behind John, with the result that the tip of the sjambock caught the Englishman on the leg.

"Be careful, sir, with that whip," said John to Muller, restraining his temper with difficulty. "Now, how do you know that the man stole your horse's forage; and what business have you to touch him? If there was anything wrong you should have reported it to me."

"He lies, Baas, he lies!" yelled out the Hottentot in tremulous, high-pitched tones. "He lies; he has always been a liar, and worse than a liar. Yah! yah! I can tell things about him. The land is English now, and Boers can't kill the black people as they like. That man—that Boer, Muller, he shot my father and my mother

—my father first, then my mother; he gave her two bullets—she did not die the first time.”

“You yellow devil!—You black-skinned, black-hearted, lying son of Satan!” roared the great Boer, his very beard curling with fury. “Is that the way you talk to your masters? Out of the light, rooibaatje” [soldier]—this was to John—“and I will cut his tongue out of him. I’ll show him how we deal with a yellow liar;” and without further ado he made a rush for the Hottentot. As he came, John, whose blood was now thoroughly up, put out his open hand, and, bending forward, pushed with all his strength on Muller’s advancing chest. John was a very powerfully made man, though not a very large one, and the push sent Muller staggering back.

“What do you mean by that, rooibaatje?” shouted Muller, his face livid with fury. “Get out of my road or I will mark that pretty face of yours. I have some goods to pay you for as it is, Englishman, and I always pay my debts. Out of the path, curse you!” and he again rushed for the Hottentot.

This time John, who was now almost as angry as his assailant, did not wait for him to reach him, but, springing forward, hooked his arm around

Muller's throat and, before he could close with him, with one tremendous jerk managed not only to stop his wild career, but to reverse the motion, and then, by interposing his foot with considerable neatness, to land him—powerful man as he was—on his back in a pool of drainage that had collected from the stable in a hollow of the inn-yard. Down he went with a splash, and amid a shout of delight from the crowd, who always like to see an aggressor laid low, his head bumping with considerable force against the lintel of the door. For a moment he lay still, and John was afraid that the man was really hurt. Presently, however, he rose, and, without attempting any further hostile demonstration or saying a single word, tramped off towards the house, leaving his enemy to compose his ruffled nerves as best he could. Now John, like most gentlemen, hated a row with all his heart, though he had the Anglo-Saxon tendency to go through with it unflinchingly when once it began. Indeed, the whole thing irritated him almost beyond bearing, for he knew that the story would with additions go the round of the country-side, and, what is more, that he had made a powerful and implacable enemy.

"This is all your fault, you drunken little blackguard!" he said, turning savagely on the Tottie, who, now that his excitement had left him, was snivelling and drivelling in an intoxicated fashion, and calling him his preserver and his Baas in maudlin accents.

"He hit me, Baas; he hit me, and I did not take the forage. He is a bad man, Baas Muller."

"Be off with you and get the horses inspanned; you are half-drunk," he growled, and, having seen the operation advancing to a conclusion, he went to the sitting-room of the hotel, where Bessie was waiting in happy ignorance of the disturbance. It was not till they were well on their homeward way that he told her what had passed, whereat, remembering the scene she had herself gone through with Frank Muller, and the threats that he had then made use of, she looked very grave. Her old uncle, too, was very much put out when he heard the story on their arrival home that evening.

"You have made an enemy, Niel," he said, "and a bad one. Not but what you were right to stand up for the Hottentot. I would have done as much myself had I been there and ten years younger, but Frank Muller is not the man

to forget being put upon his back before a lot of Kafirs and white folk too. Perhaps that Jantjé is sober by now." (This conversation took place upon the following morning, as they sat upon the verandah after breakfast.) "I will go and call him, and we will hear what this story is about his father and his mother."

Presently he returned, followed by the ragged, dirty-looking little Hottentot, who took off his hat and squatted down on the drive, looking very miserable and ashamed of himself, in the full glare of the African sun, to the effects of which he appeared to be totally impervious.

"Now, Jantjé, listen to me," said the old man. "Yesterday you got drunk again. Well, I'm not going to talk about that now, except to say that if I find or hear of your being drunk once more—you leave this place."

"Yes, Baas," said the Hottentot meekly. "I was drunk, though not very; I only had half a bottle of Cape Smoke."

"By getting drunk you made a quarrel with Baas Muller, so that blows passed between Baas Muller and the Baas here on your account, which was more than you are worth. Now when Baas Muller had struck you, you said that he had shot

your father and your mother. Was that a lie, or what did you mean by saying it?"

"It was no lie, Baas," said the Hottentot excitedly. "I have said it once, and I will say it again. Listen, Baas, and I will tell you the story. When I was young—so high"—and he held his hand high enough to indicate a Tottie of about fourteen years of age—"we, that is, my father, my mother, my uncle—a very old man, older than the Baas" (pointing to Silas Croft)—"were bijwoners [authorised squatters] on a place belonging to old Jacob Muller, Baas Frank's father, down in Lydenburg yonder. It was a bushveldt farm, and old Jacob used to come down there with his cattle from the High veldt in the winter when there was no grass in the High veldt, and with him came the Englishwoman, his wife, and the young Baas Frank—the Baas we saw yesterday."

"How long was all this ago?" asked Mr. Croft.

Jantjé counted on his fingers for some seconds, and then held up his hand and opened it four times in succession. "So," he said, "twenty years last winter. Baas Frank was young then, he had only a little down upon his chin. One

year when Om Jacob went away, after the first rains, he left six oxen that were too poor [thin] to go, with my father, and told him to look after them as though they were his children. But the oxen were bewitched. Three of them took the lung-sick and died, a lion got one, a snake killed one, and one ate 'tulip' and died too. So when Om Jacob came back the next year all the oxen were gone. He was very angry with my father, and beat him with a yoke-strap till he was all blood, and though we showed him the bones of the oxen, he said that we had stolen them and sold them.

"Now Om Jacob had a beautiful span of black oxen that he loved like children. Sixteen of them were there, and they would come up to the yoke when he called them and put down their heads of themselves. They were tame as dogs. These oxen were thin when they came down, but in two months they got fat and began to want to trek about as oxen do. At this time there was a Basutu, one of Sequati's people, resting in our hut, for he had hurt his foot with a thorn. When Om Jacob found that the Basutu was there he was very angry, for he said that all Basutus were thieves. So my father told the

Basutu that the Baas said that he must go away, and he went that night. Next morning the span of black oxen were gone too. The kraal-gate was down, and they had gone. We hunted all day, but we could not find them. Then Om Jacob got mad with rage, and the young Baas Frank told him that one of the Kafir boys had said to him that he had heard my father sell them to the Basutu for sheep which he was to pay to us in the summer. It was a lie, but Baas Frank hated my father because of something about a woman—a Zulu girl. Next morning when we were asleep, just at daybreak, Om Jacob Muller and Baas Frank and two Kafirs came into the hut and pulled us out, the old man my uncle, my father, my mother, and myself, and tied us up to four mimosa-trees with buffalo reims. Then the Kafirs went away, and Om Jacob asked my father where the cattle were, and my father told him that he did not know. Then Om Jacob took off his hat and said a prayer to the Big Man in the sky, and when he had done Baas Frank came up with a gun and stood quite close and shot my father dead, and he fell forward and hung quiet over the reim, his head touching his feet. Then he loaded the gun again and shot

the old man, my uncle, and he slipped down dead, and his hands stuck up in the air against the reim. Next he shot my mother, but the bullet did not kill her, and cut the reim, and she ran away, and he ran after her and killed her. When that was done he came back to shoot me; but I was young then, and did not know that it is better to be dead than to live like a dog, and I cried and prayed for mercy while he was loading the gun.

“But the Baas only laughed, and said he would teach Hottentots how to steal cattle, and old Om Jacob prayed out loud to the Big Man and said he was very sorry for me, but it was the dear Lord’s will. And then, just as Baas Frank lifted the gun, he dropped it again, for there, coming softly, softly over the brow of the hill, in and out between the bushes, were all the sixteen oxen! They had got out in the night and strayed away into some kloof for a change of pasture, and come back when they were full and tired of being alone. Om Jacob turned quite white and scratched his head, and then fell upon his knees and thanked the dear Lord for saving my life; and just then the Englishwoman, Baas Frank’s mother, came down from the waggon to

see what the firing was at, and when she saw all the people dead and me weeping, tied to the tree, and learnt what it was about, she went quite mad, for sometimes she had a kind heart when she was not drunk, and said that a curse would fall on them, and that they would all die in blood. And she took a knife and cut me loose, though Baas Frank wanted to kill me, so that I might tell no tales; and I ran away, travelling by night and hiding by day, for I was very much frightened, till I got to Natal, and there I stopped, working in Natal till the land became English, when Baas Croft hired me to drive his cart up from Maritzburg; and living by here I found Baas Frank, looking bigger but just the same except for his beard.

“There, Baas, that is the truth, and all the truth, and that is why I hate Baas Frank, because he shot my father and mother, and why Baas Frank hates me, because he cannot forget that he did it and because I saw him do it, for, as our people say, ‘one always hates a man one has wounded with a spear’;” and having finished his narrative, the miserable-looking little man picked up his greasy old felt hat that had a leather strap fixed round the crown, in which were stuck a couple of frayed ostrich feathers, and jammed

it down over his ears and then fell to drawing circles on the soil with his long toes. His auditors only looked at one another. Such a ghastly tale seemed to be beyond comment. They never doubted its truth; the man's way of telling it carried conviction with it. And, indeed, two of them at any rate had heard such stories before. Most people have who live in the wilder parts of South Africa, though they are not all to be taken for gospel.

"You say," remarked old Silas at last, "that the woman said that a curse would fall on them and that they would die in blood? She was right. Twelve years ago Om Jacob and his wife were murdered by a party of Mapoch's Kafirs down on the edge of that very Lydenburg veldt. There was a great noise about it at the time, I remember, but nothing came of it. Baas Frank was not there. He was away shooting buck, so he escaped, and inherited all his father's farms and cattle, and came to live here."

"So!" said the Hottentot, without showing the slightest interest or surprise. "I knew it would be so, but I wish I had been there to see it. I saw that there was a devil in the woman, and that they would die as she said. When there is a devil in people they always speak the truth,

because they can't help it. Look, Baas, I draw a circle in the sand with my foot, and I say some words so, and at last the ends touch. There, that is the circle of Om Jacob and his wife the Englishwoman. The ends have touched and they are dead. An old witch-doctor taught me how to draw the circle of a man's life and what words to say. And now I draw another of Baas Frank. Ah! there is a stone sticking up in the way. The ends will not touch. But now I work and work and work with my foot, and say the words and say the words, and so—the stone comes up and the ends touch now. So it is with Baas Frank. One day the stone will come up and the ends will touch, and he too will die in blood. The devil in the Englishwoman said so, and devils cannot lie or speak half the truth only. And now, look, I rub my foot over the circles and they are gone, and there is only the path again. That means that when they have died in blood they will be quite forgotten and stamped out. Even their graves will be flat,” and he wrinkled up his yellow face into a smile, or rather a grin, and then added in a matter-of-fact way:

“Does the Baas wish the grey mare to have one bundle of green forage or two?”

· CHAPTER X.

JOHN HAS AN ESCAPE.

ON the following Monday, John, taking Jantjé to drive him, departed in a rough Scotch cart, to which were harnessed two of the best horses at Mooifontein, to shoot buck at Hans Coetzee's.

He reached the place at about half-past eight, and concluded, from the fact of the presence of several carts and horses, that he was not the only guest. Indeed, the first person that he saw as the cart pulled up was his late enemy, Frank Muller.

"Kek [look], Baas," said Jantjé, "there is Baas Frank talking to a Basutu!"

John was, as may be imagined, not best pleased at this meeting. He had always disliked the man, and since Muller's conduct on the previous Friday, and Jantjé's story of the dark deed of blood in which he had been the principal actor, he positively loathed the sight of him. He got out of the cart, and was going to walk round to

the back of the house in order to avoid him, when Muller, to all appearance, suddenly became aware of his presence, and advanced to meet him with the utmost cordiality.

“How do you do, Captain?” he said, holding out his hand, which John just touched. “So you have come to shoot buck with Om Coetzee; going to show us Transvaalers how to do it, eh? There, Captain, don’t look as stiff as a rifle barrel. I know what you are thinking of: that little business at Wakkerstroom on Friday, is it not? Well, now, I tell you what it is, I was in the wrong, and I ain’t afraid to say so as between man and man. I had had a glass, that was the fact, and did not quite know what I was about. We have got to live as neighbours here, so let us forget all about it and be brothers again. I never bear malice, not I. It is not the Lord’s will that we should bear malice. Hit out from the shoulder, I say, and then forget all about it. If it hadn’t been for that little monkey,” he added, jerking his thumb in the direction of Jantjé, who was holding the horses’ heads, “it would never have happened, and it is not nice that two Christians should quarrel about such as he.”

Muller jerked out this long speech in a suc-

cession of sentences, something as a schoolboy repeats a hardly learnt lesson, fidgeting his feet and letting his restless eyes travel about the ground as he did so; and it was evident to John, who stood quite still and listened to it in icy silence, that it was by no means an extemporary one. It had too clearly been composed for the occasion.

"I do not wish to quarrel with anybody, Meinheer Muller," he answered at length. "I never do quarrel unless it is forced on me, and then," he added grimly, "I do my best to make it unpleasant for my enemy. The other day you attacked first my servant and then myself. I am glad that you now see that this was an improper thing to do, and, so far as I am concerned, there is an end of the matter," and he turned to enter the house.

Muller accompanied him as far as where Jantjé was standing at the horses' heads. Here he stopped, and, putting his hand in his pocket, took out a two-shilling piece and threw it to the Hottentot, calling to him to catch it.

Jantjé was holding the horses with one hand. In the other he held his stick—a long walking kerrie that he always carried, the same on which

he had shown Bessie the notches. In order to catch the piece of money he dropped the stick, and Muller's quick eye catching sight of the notches beneath the knob, he stooped down, picked it up, and examined it.

"What do these mean, boy?" he asked, pointing to the line of big and little notches, some of which had evidently been cut years ago.

Jantjé touched his hat, spat upon the "Scotchman," as the natives of that part of Africa call a two-shilling piece,* and pocketed it before he answered. The fact that the giver had murdered all his near relations did not make the gift less desirable in his eyes. Hottentot moral sense is not very elevated.

"No, Baas," he said with a curious grin, "that is how I reckon. If anybody beats Jantjé, Jantjé cuts a notch upon the stick, and every night before he goes to sleep he looks at it and says, 'One day you will strike that man twice who struck you once,' and so on, Baas. Look what a line of

* Because once upon a time a Scotchman made a great impression on the simple native mind in Natal by palming off some thousand of florins among them at the nominal value of half a crown.

them there are, Baas. One day I shall pay them all back again, Baas Frank."

Muller abruptly dropped the stick, and followed John towards the house. It was a much better building than the Boers generally indulge in, and the sitting-room, though innocent of flooring—unless clay and cowdung mixed can be called a floor—was more or less covered with mats made of springbuck skins. In the centre of the room was a table made of the pretty "buckenhout" wood, which has the appearance of having been industriously pricked all over with a darning-needle, and round it were chairs and couches made of stinkwood, and seated with rimpis or strips of hide.

In one big chair at the end of the room, busily employed in doing nothing, sat Tanta [Aunt] Coetzee, the wife of Old Hans, a large and weighty woman, who had evidently once been rather handsome; and on the couches were some half-dozen Boers, their rifles in their hands or between their knees.

It struck John as he entered that some of these did not look best pleased to see him, and he thought he heard one young fellow, with a

hang-dog expression of face, mutter something about the "damned Englishman" to his neighbour rather more loudly than was necessary to convey his sentiments. However, old Coetzee came forward to greet him heartily enough, and called to his daughters—two fine girls, very smartly dressed for Dutch women—to give the Captain a cup of coffee. Then John made the rounds after the Boer fashion, and beginning with the old lady in the chair, received a lymphatic shake of the hand from every single soul in the room. They did not rise—it is not customary to do so—they merely extended their paws, all of them more or less damp, and muttered the mystic monosyllable "Daag," short for good-day. It is a very trying ceremony till one gets used to it, and John pulled up panting, to be presented with a cup of hot coffee that he did not want, but which it would be rude not to drink.

"The Captain is a rooibaatje?" said the old lady "Aunt" Coetzee interrogatively, and yet with the certainty of one who states a fact.

John signified that he was.

"What does the Captain come to the 'land' for? Is it to spy?"

The whole room listened attentively to their

hostess's question, and then turned their heads to listen for the answer.

"No. I have come to farm with Silas Croft."

There was a general smile of incredulity. Could a rooibaatje farm? Certainly not.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," announced the old vrouw oracularly, and casting a severe glance at the wolf in sheep's clothing, the man of blood who pretended to farm.

Everybody looked at John again, and awaited his answer in dead silence.

"There are more than a hundred thousand men in the regular British army, and as many more in the Indian army, and twice as many more volunteers," he said, in a rather irritated voice.

This statement also was received with the most discouraging incredulity.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," repeated the old lady, in a tone of certainty that was positively crushing.

"Yah, yah!" chimed in some of the younger men in chorus.

"There are three thousand men in the British army," she repeated for the third time in triumph.

"If the Captain says that there are more he lies. It is natural that he should lie about his own army. My grandfather's brother was at Cape Town in the time of Governor Smith, and he saw the whole British army. He counted them; there were exactly three thousand. I say that there are three thousand men in the British army."

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus; and John gazed at this terrible person in bland exasperation.

"How many men do you command in the British army?" she interrogated after a solemn pause.

"A hundred," said John sharply.

"Girl," said the old woman, addressing one of her daughters, "you have been to school and can reckon. How many times does one hundred go into three thousand?"

The young lady addressed giggled confusedly, and looked for assistance to a sardonic young Boer whom she was going to marry, who shook his head sadly, indicating thereby that these were mysteries into which it was not well to pry. Thrown on her own resources, the young lady plunged into the recesses of an intricate calculation, in which her fingers played a considerable

part, and finally, with an air of triumph, announced that it went twenty-six times exactly.

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus, "it goes twenty-six times exactly."

"The Captain," said the oracular old lady, who was rapidly driving John mad, "commands a twenty-sixth part of the British army, and he says that he comes here to farm with Uncle Silas Croft. He says," she went on, with withering contempt, "that he comes here to farm when he commands a twenty-sixth part of the British army. It is evident that he lies."

"Yah, yah!" said the chorus.

"It is natural that he should lie!" she continued; "all Englishmen lie, especially the rooibaatje Englishman, but he should not lie so badly. It must vex the dear Lord to hear a man lie so badly, even though he be an Englishman and a rooibaatje."

At this point John burst from the house, and swore frantically to himself as soon as he got outside; and, really, it is to be hoped that he was forgiven, for the provocation was not small. It is not pleasant to be universally set down not only as a "leugenaar" [liar], but as one of the very feeblest order.

In another minute old Hans Coetzee came out and patted him warmly on the shoulder, in a way that seemed to say that, whatever others might think of the insufficiency of his powers of falsehood, he, for one, quite appreciated them, and announced that it was time to be moving.

Accordingly the whole party got into their carts or on to their shooting-horses, as the case might be, and started. Frank Muller was, John noticed, mounted as usual on his fine black horse. After driving for more than half an hour along an indefinite kind of waggon track, the leading cart, in which was old Hans Coetzee himself, a Malay driver, and a coloured Cape boy, turned to the left across the open veldt, and the others followed in turn. This went on for some time, till at last they reached the crest of a rise that commanded a large sweep of open country, and here Hans halted and held up his hand, whereon the others halted too. On looking out over the vast plain before him John discovered the reason. About half a mile beneath them was a great herd of blesbuck feeding, three hundred or more of them, and beyond them again another herd of some sixty or seventy much larger and wilder-looking animals with white tails, which John at

once recognised as vilderbeeste. Nearer to them again, dotted about here and there on the plain, were a couple of dozen or so of graceful yellow springbuck.

Then a council of war was held, which resulted in the men on horseback—among whom was Frank Muller—being despatched to circumvent the herds and drive them towards the carts, that took up their stations at various points, towards which the buck were likely to make.

Then came a pause of a quarter of an hour or so, till suddenly, from the far ridge of the opposite slope, John saw a couple of puffs of white smoke float up into the air, and one of the vilderbeeste below rolled over on his back, kicking and plunging furiously. Thereon the whole herd of buck turned and came thundering towards them, stretched in a long line across the wide veldt; the springbuck first, then the blesbuck, looking, owing to their peculiar way of holding their long heads down as they galloped, for all the world like a herd of great bearded goats. Behind and mixed up with them were the velderbeeste, who twisted and turned, and jumped into the air as though they had gone clean off their heads and were next second going clean on to

them. It is very difficult, owing to his extraordinary method of progression, to distinguish one part of a galloping vilderbeeste from another; now it is his horns, now his tail, and now his hoofs that present themselves to the watcher's bewildered vision, and now again they all seem to be mixed up together. On came the great herd making the ground shake beneath their footfall: and after them galloped the mounted Boers, every now and again jumping from their horses to fire a shot into the line of game, which generally resulted in some poor animal being left sprawling on the ground, whereon the sportsmen would remount and continue the chase.

Presently the buck were within range of some of the guns in the carts, and a regular fusillade began. About twenty blesbuck turned and came straight past John, within forty yards of him. Springing to the ground he fired both barrels of his "Express" at them as they tore past—alas and alas! without touching them. The first bullet struck under their bellies, the second must have shaved their backs. Reloading rapidly, he fired again at about two hundred yards' range, and this time one fell to his second barrel. But he knew that it was a chance shot: he had fired at

the last buck, and he had killed one ten paces in front of him. The fact of the matter is that this sort of shooting is exceedingly difficult till one knows how to do it. The inexperienced hand firing across a line of buck will not generally kill one shot in twenty, as an infinitesimal difference in elevation, or the slightest error in judging distance—in itself a most difficult art on those great plains—will make the difference. A Boer almost invariably gets immediately behind a herd of running buck, and fires at one about half-way down the line. Consequently if his elevation is a little wrong, or if he has misjudged his sighting, the odds are that he will hit one either in front of or behind the particular animal fired at. All that is necessary is that the line of fire should be good. This John soon learnt, and when he had mastered the fact he became as good a game shot as the majority of Boers, but to-day being his first, he did not, much to his vexation, particularly distinguish himself, the result of which was that his friends the Dutchmen went away firmly convinced that the English rooibaatjee shot as indifferently as he lied.

Jumping into the cart again, and leaving the dead blesbuck to look after itself for the present

—not a very safe thing to do in a country where there are so many vultures—John, or rather Jantjé, put the horses into a gallop, and away they went at full tear. It was a most exciting mode of progression, bumping along furiously with a loaded rifle in his hands over a plain on which antheaps as large as an armchair were scattered like burnt almonds on a cake. Then there were the ant-bear holes to reckon with, and the little swamps in the hollows, and other agreeable surprises. But the rush and exhilaration of the thing was too great to allow him much time to think of his neck, so away they flew, sticking on to the cart as best they could, and trusting to Providence to save them from a complete smash up. Now they were bounding over an antheap, now one of the horses was on his nose, but somehow they always escaped the last dire disaster, thanks chiefly to the little Hottentot's skilful driving. Every few minutes or so they would pull up whenever the game was within range, and John would spring from the cart and let drive, and then jump in and follow on again. This went on for nearly an hour, in which time he had fired twenty-seven cartridges and killed three blesbuck and wounded a vilderbeeste, which they proceeded to chase.

But the vilderbeeste was struck in the rump, and a buck so wounded will go a long way, and go very fast also, and some miles of ground had been got over before he began to rest, only starting on again as they drew near. At last, on crossing the crest of a little rise, John saw what at first he took to be his vilderbeeste dead. A second look, however, showed him that, although it was a dead vilderbeeste, it most undoubtedly was not the one that he had wounded, for that was standing, its head hanging down, about one hundred and twenty yards beyond the other animal, which had, no doubt, fallen to somebody else's rifle, or else been wounded farther back and come here to die. Now the vilderbeeste lay within a hundred yards of them, and Jantjé pointed out to John that his best plan would be to get out of the cart and creep on his hands and knees up to the dead animal, from the cover of which he would get a good shot at his own wounded bull.

Accordingly Jantjé having withdrawn with the cart and horses out of sight under the shelter of the rise, John crouched upon his hands and knees and proceeded to carry out his stalk. He got on all right till he was quite close to the dead cow,

and was congratulating himself on the prospect of an excellent shot at the wounded bull, when suddenly something struck the ground violently just beneath his stomach, throwing up a cloud of earth and dust. He stopped amazed, and as he did so heard the report of a rifle somewhat to his right. It was a rifle bullet that had passed beneath him. Scarcely had he realised this when there was a sudden commotion in his hair, and the soft black felt hat that he was wearing started from his head, apparently of its own accord, and, after twirling round twice or thrice in the air, fell gently to the earth, and as it did so the sound of a second report reached his ears. It was now evident that somebody was firing at him; so, jumping up from his crouching position, he tossed his arms into the air and sprang and shouted in a way that left no mistake as to his whereabouts. In another minute he saw a man on horseback, cantering easily towards him, in whom he had little difficulty in recognising Frank Muller. He went and picked up his hat; there was a bullet-hole right through it. Then, full of wrath, he advanced to meet Frank Muller.

“What the —— did you mean by firing at me?” he asked.

“Allemachter, carle!” [Almighty, my dear fellow] was the cool answer, “I thought that you were a vilderbeeste calf. I galloped the cow and killed her, and she had a calf with her, and when I got the cartridges out of my rifle—for one stuck and took me some time—and the new ones in, I looked up, and there, as I thought, was the calf. So I got my rifle on and let drive, first with one barrel and then with the other, and when I saw you jump up like that and shout, and that I had been firing at a man, I nearly fainted. Thank the Almighty I did not hit you.”

John listened coldly. “I suppose that I am bound to believe you, Meinheer Muller,” he said. “But I have been told that you have the most wonderful sight of any man in these parts, which makes it odd that at 300 yards you should mistake a man upon his hands and knees for a vilderbeeste calf.”

“Does the Captain think, then, that I wished to murder him; especially,” he added, “after I took his hand this morning?”

“I don’t know what I think,” answered John, looking straight into Muller’s eyes, which fell before his own. “All I know is that your curious mistake very nearly cost me my life. Look here!”

and he took a lock of his brown hair out of the crown of his perforated hat and showed it to the other.

"Ay, it was very close. Let us thank God that you escaped."

"It could not well have been closer, Meinheer. I hope that, both for your own sake and for the sake of the people who go out shooting with you, you will not make such a mistake again. Good-morning!"

The handsome Boer, or Anglo-Boer, sat on his horse stroking his beautiful beard and gazing curiously after John Niel's sturdy English-looking figure as he marched towards the cart (for, of course, the wounded vilderbeeste had long ago vanished).

"I wonder," he said to himself aloud, as he turned his horse's head and rode leisurely away, "if the old volk are right after all, and if there is a God." (Frank Muller was sufficiently impregnated with modern ideas to be a free-thinker.) "It almost seems like it," he went on, "else how did it come that the one bullet passed under his belly and the other just touched his head without harming him? I aimed carefully enough too, and I could make the shot nineteen times out of

twenty and not miss. Bah, a God! I snap my fingers at him. Chance is the only god. Chance blows men about like the dead grass, till death comes down like the veldt fire and burns them up. But there are men who ride chance as one rides a young colt—ay, who turn its headlong rushing and rearing to their own ends—who let it fly hither and thither till it is weary, and then canter it along the road that leads to triumph. I, Frank Muller, am one of those men. I never fail in the end. I will kill that Englishman. Perhaps I will kill old Silas Croft and the Hottentot too. Bah! they do not know what is coming. I know; I have helped to lay the mine; and unless they bend to my will I shall be the one to fire it. I will kill them all, and I will take Mooifontein, and then I will marry Bessie. She will fight against it, but that will make it all the sweeter. She loves that rooibaasje; I know it; and I will kiss her over his dead body. Ah! there are the carts. I don't see the Captain. Driven home, I suppose, on account of the shock to his nerves. Well, I must talk to those fools. Lord, what fools they are with their talk about the 'land,' and the 'verdomde Britische Gouvernement.' They don't know what is good for them. Silly sheep, with

Frank Muller for a shepherd! Ay, and they shall have Frank Muller for a president one day, and I will rule them too. Bah! I hate the English; but I am glad that I am half English for all that, for that is where I get the brains! But these people—fools, fools! Well, I shall pipe and they shall dance!”

“Baas,” said Jantjé to John, as they were driving homewards, “Baas Frank shot at you.”

“How do you know that?” asked John.

“I saw him. He was stalking the wounded bull, and not looking for a calf at all. There was no calf. He was just going to fire at the wounded bull when he turned and saw you, and he knelt down on one knee and covered you, and before I could do anything he fired, and then when he saw that he had missed you he fired again, and I don’t know how it was he did not kill you, for he is a wonderful shot with a rifle—he never misses.”

“I will have the man tried for attempted murder,” said John, bringing the butt-end of his rifle down with a bang on to the bottom of the cart. “A villain like that shall not go scot-free.”

Jantjé grinned. “It is no use, Baas. He

would get off, for I am the only witness. A jury won't believe a black man in this country, and they would never punish a Boer for shooting at an Englishman. No, Baas! you should lie up one day in the veldt where he is going to pass and shoot *him*. That is what I would do if I dared."

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE BRINK.

FOR a few weeks after John Niel's adventure at the shooting-party no event of any importance occurred at Mooifontein. Day followed day in charming monotony, for, whatever "gay worldlings" may think, monotony is as full of charm as a dreamy summer afternoon. "Happy is the country that has no history," says the voice of wisdom, and the same remark may be made with even more truth of the individual. To get up in the morning and feel that one is full of health and strength, to pursue the common round and daily task till the evening, and finally to go to bed pleasantly tired and sleep the sleep of the just, is the true secret of happiness. Fierce excitements, excursions, and alarms do not conduce either to mental or physical well-being, and it is for this reason that we find that those whose lives have been chiefly concerned with them crave the most after the quiet round of domestic life.

When they get it they generally, it is true, pant for the ardours of the fray whereof the dim and distant sounds are echoing through the spaces of their heart, in the same way that the countries without a history are always anxious to write one in their own blood; but then that is a principle of nature which will allow of no standing still among her subjects, and has ordained that strife of one sort or another shall be the absolute condition of existence.

On the whole, John found that the life of a South African farmer came well up to his expectations. He had ample occupation; indeed, what between ostriches, horses, cattle, sheep, and crops, he was rather over than under occupied. Nor was he greatly troubled by the lack of civilised society, for he was a man who read a great deal, and books could be ordered from Durban, and Cape Town, while the weekly mail brought up an ample supply of papers. On Sundays he always read the political articles in the "Saturday Review" aloud to old Silas Croft, who, as he got older, found that the print tried his eyes, and this was an attention that the old gentleman greatly appreciated. Silas was a well-informed man, and had, notwithstanding his

long life spent in a half-civilised country, never lost his hold of affairs or his interest in the wide and rushing life of the world in one of whose side eddies he lived apart. This task of reading the "Saturday Review" aloud had formerly been a part of Bessie's Sunday service, but her uncle was very glad to effect an exchange. Bessie's mind was not quite in tune with the profundities of that learned journal, and her attention was apt to wander at the most pointed passages. And thus it came about, what between the "Saturday Review" and other things, that a very warm and deep attachment sprang up betwixt the old man and his younger partner. John was a very taking man, especially to the old, for whom he was never tired of performing little services. One of his favourite sayings was that old people should be "let down easy," and he acted up to it. Moreover, there was a quiet jollity and a bluff honesty about him which was undoubtedly attractive both to men and women. But his great recommendation was that he was a well-informed experienced man, and a gentleman, in a country in which both were rare. Every week the old man got to rely more and more on him, and let things pass more and more into his hands.

"I'm getting old, Niel," he said to him one night; "I'm getting very old; the grasshopper is becoming a burden to me: and I'll tell you what it is, my boy," laying his hand affectionately upon John's shoulder. "I have no son of my own, and you will have to be a son to me, as my dear Bessie has been a daughter."

John looked up into the kindly, handsome old face, crowned with the fringe of snowy hair, and at the two keen eyes set deep in it beneath the overhanging eyebrows, and thought of his old father who was long since dead; and somehow he was moved, and his own eyes filled with tears.

"Ay, Mr. Croft," he said, taking the old man's hand, "that I will to the best of my ability."

"Thank you, my boy, thank you. I don't like talking much about these things, but, as I said, I am getting old, and the Almighty may require my account any day, and if He does I rely on you to look after these two girls. It is a wild country this, and one never knows what may happen in it from day to day, and they will want it. Sometimes I wish I were clear of the place. And now I'm going to bed. I am beginning to feel as though I had done my day's work in the world. I'm getting feeble, John, that is the fact of it."

After that he always called him John.

Of Jess they heard but little. She wrote every week, it is true, and gave an accurate account of all that was going on at Pretoria and of her daily doings, but she was one of those people whose letters tell one absolutely nothing of themselves and of what is passing in their minds. They might as well have been headed "Our Pretoria Letter," as Bessie said disgustedly after reading through three sheets in Jess's curious, upright handwriting, "Once you lose sight of Jess," she went on, "she might as well be dead for all you learn about her. Not that one learns very much when she is with one," she added reflectively.

"She is a peculiar woman," said John thoughtfully. At first he had missed her very much, for, peculiar as she undoubtedly was, she had touched a new string in him somewhere, of the existence of which he had not till then been himself aware. And what is more, it had answered pretty strongly for some time; but now it was slowly vibrating itself into silence again, much as a harp does when the striker takes his fingers from the strings. Had she stayed on another week or so the effect might have been more enduring.

But although Jess had gone away Bessie had

not. On the contrary, she was always about him, surrounding him with that tender care a woman, however involuntarily, cannot prevent herself from lavishing on the man she loves. Her beauty moved about the place like a beam of light about a garden, for she was indeed a lovely woman, and as pure and good as she was lovely. Nor could John long remain in ignorance of her partiality for him. He was not a vain man—very much the reverse, indeed—but neither was he a fool. And it must be said that, though Bessie never overstepped the bounds of maidenly reserve, neither did she take particular pains to hide her preference. Indeed, it was too strong to permit of her doing so. Not that she was animated by the half-divine, soul-searing breath of passion, such as animated her sister, which is a very rare thing, and, take it altogether, as undesirable and unsuitable to the ordinary conditions of this prosaic and work-a-day life as it is rare. But she was tenderly and truly in love after the ordinary-young-womanly fashion; indeed, her passion, measured by the everyday standard, would have proved to be a deep one. However this was, she was undoubtedly prepared to make John Niel a faithful and a loving wife if he chose to ask her to become so

And as the weeks went on—though, of course, he knew nothing of all this—it became a very serious question to John whether he should not ask her. It is not good for man to live alone, especially in the Transvaal, and it was not possible for him to pass day by day at the side of so much beauty and so much grace without thinking that it would be well to draw the bond of union closer. Indeed, had John been a younger man or had less experience, he would have succumbed to the temptation much sooner than he did. But he was neither very young nor very inexperienced. Ten years or more ago, in his green and gushing youth, he had, as has been said, burnt his fingers pretty sharply, and a lively recollection of this incident in his career had heretofore proved a very efficient warning to him. Also, he had got to that period of life when men think a great many times before they wildly commit themselves to the deep matrimonial waters. At three-and-twenty most of us are willing, for the sake of a pretty face, to undertake the serious and in many cases overwhelming burdens, risks, and cares of family life, and the responsibility of the parentage of a large and healthy brood, but at three-and-thirty we take a different view of the

matter. The temptation may be great, but the per contra list is so very alarming, and we never know even then if we see all the liabilities. Such are the black thoughts that move in the breasts of selfish men, to the great disadvantage of the marriage market; and however it may lower John Niel in the eyes of those who take the trouble to follow this portion of his life's history, it must, in the interests of truth, be confessed that he was not free from them. The fact of the matter was that, sweet as Bessie was and pretty as she was, he was not violently in love with her; and one requires at thirty-four to be violently in love to rush into the near risk of matrimony. But, however commendably cautious a man may be, he is always liable to be thrown into temptation sufficiently strong to sweep away his caution and make a mockery of his plans. However strong the rope, it has its breaking strain; and in the same way our power of resistance to any given course depends entirely upon the power of the temptation to draw us into it. And so it was destined to be with our friend John Niel.

It was about a week after his conversation with old Silas Croft that it occurred to John that Bessie's manner had grown rather strange of late.

It seemed to him that she had avoided his society instead of, if not courting it, at least showing a certain partiality for it. Also, she had been looking pale and worried, and evinced a tendency to irritation that was quite foreign to her natural sweetness of disposition. Now, when a person on whom one is accustomed to depend for most of that social intercourse and those pleasant little amenities that members of one sex value from another, suddenly cuts off the supply without any apparent rhyme or reason, it is enough to induce a feeling of wonder, not to say of vexation, in the breast. It never occurred to John that the reason might be that Bessie was truly fond of him, and perhaps unconsciously disappointed that he did not show a warmer interest in her. If, however, we were to examine into the facts of the case we should probably discover that this was the real explanation of the change. Bessie was a straightforward young woman, whose mind and purposes were as clear as running water. She was vexed with John—though she would probably not have owned it even to herself in so many words—and her manner reflected the condition of her mind.

“Bessie,” said John one lovely day, just as the afternoon was merging into evening, “Bessie”—

he always called her Bessie now—"I am going down to the black wattle plantation by the big mealie patch. I want to see how those young trees are doing. If you have done your cooking"—for Bessie had been engaged in making a cake, as young ladies, to their souls' health, often have to do in the colonies—"I wish you would put on your hat and come with me. I don't believe that you have been out to-day."

"Thank you, Captain Niel, I don't think that I want to come out."

"Why not?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know—because there is too much to do. If I go out that stupid girl will burn the cake," and she pointed to a Kafir intombi [young girl] who, arrayed in a blue smock, a sweet smile, and a feather stuck in her wool, was vigorously employed in staring at the flies on the ceiling and sucking her black fingers. "Really," she added with a little stamp, "one needs the patience of an angel to put up with that girl's stupidity. Yesterday she smashed the biggest dinner-dish and then brought me the pieces with a broad grin on her face, and asked me to 'make them one' again. The white people were so clever, she said, it would be no trouble to me. If they could make

the white plate once, and could make flowers grow on it, it would surely be easy to make it whole again. I did not know whether to laugh or cry or throw the pieces at her."

"Look here, young woman," said John, taking the sinning girl by the arm and leading her solemnly to the oven, which was opened to receive the cake; "look here, if you let that cake burn while the inkosikaas [lady chieftain] is away, when I come back I will cram you into the oven to burn with it. I cooked a girl like that in Natal last year, and when she came out she was quite white!"

Bessie translated this fiendish threat, whereat the girl grinned from ear to ear and murmured "Koos" [chief] in cheerful acquiescence. A Kafir girl on a pleasant afternoon is not troubled by the prospect of being baked at nightfall, which is a long way off, especially when it was John Niel who threatened the baking. The natives about Mooifontein had pretty well taken the measure of John's foot by this time. His threats were awful, but his performances were not great. Once, indeed, he had to have a regular stand-up fight with a great fellow who thought that he could on this account be taken advantage of, but after he

had succeeded in administering a sound hiding to that champion he was never again troubled in this respect.

"Now," he said, "I think we have provided for the safety of your cake, so come on."

"Thank you, Captain Niel," answered Bessie, looking at him in a bewitching little way she well knew how to assume, "thank you, but I think I had rather not go out walking." This was what she said, but her eyes added, "I am offended with you; I want to have nothing to do with you."

"Very well," said John; "then I suppose I must go alone," and he took up his hat with the air of a martyr.

Bessie looked through the open kitchen door at the lights and shadows that chased each other across the swelling bosom of the hill behind the house.

"It certainly is very fine," she said; "are you going far?"

"No, only round the plantation."

"There are so many puff-adders down there, and I hate snakes," suggested Bessie, by way of finding another excuse for not coming.

"Oh, I'll look after the puff-adders — come along."

“Well,” she said at last, as she slowly unrolled her sleeves, which had been tucked up during the cake-making, and hid her beautiful white arms, “I will come, not because I want to come, but because you have over-persuaded me. I don’t know what has come to me,” she added, with a little stamp and a sudden filling of her blue eyes with tears, “I do not seem to have any will of my own left. When I want to do one thing and you want me to do another it is I who have to do what you want; and I tell you I don’t like it, Captain Niel, and I shall be very cross out walking;” and she swept past him, on her way to fetch her hat, in that peculiarly graceful way that angry women can sometimes assume, and left him reflecting that he never saw a more charming or taking lady in Europe or out of it.

He had half a mind to risk it and ask her to marry him. But then, perhaps, she might refuse him, and that was an idea that he did not quite take to. After our first youth few men altogether relish the idea of putting themselves in a position that gives a capricious woman an opportunity of first figuratively jumping on them, and then perhaps holding them up to the scorn and obloquy of her friends, relations, and other admirers. For,

unfortunately, until the opposite is clearly demonstrated, many men are apt to believe that not a few women are by nature capricious, shallow, and unreliable; and John Niel, owing, possibly, to that unhappy little experience of his youth, must be reckoned among their misguided ranks.

CHAPTER XII.

OVER IT.

ON leaving the house Bessie and John took their way down the long avenue of blue gums. This avenue was old Silas Croft's particular pride, for although it had only been planted for about twenty years, the trees, which in the divine climate and virgin soil of the Transvaal grow at the most extraordinary rate, were for the most part very lofty, and as thick in the stem as English oaks of a hundred and fifty years' standing. The avenue was not over wide, and the trees were planted quite close one to another, with the result that their brown, pillar-like stems shot up for many feet without a branch, whilst high overhead the boughs crossed and intermingled in such a way as to form a leafy tunnel, through which one looked at the landscape beyond as through a telescope.

Down this charming avenue John and Bessie walked, and on reaching its limit turned to the

right and followed a little footpath winding in and out of the rocks that built up the plateau on the hillside on which the house stood. Presently this led them through the orchard, and then came a bare strip of veldt, a very dangerous spot in a thunderstorm, but a great safeguard to the house and trees round it, for the ironstone cropped up here, and from the house one might generally see flash after flash striking down on to it, and even running and zigzagging about its surface. To the left of this were some cultivated lands, and in front of them the plantation in which John was anxious to inspect some recently planted wattles.

They walked right to the copse without saying a word. It was surrounded by a ditch and a low sod wall, whereon Bessie seated herself, saying that she would wait there till he had looked at the trees, as she was afraid of the puff-adders, of which a large and thriving family were known to live in the plantation.

John assented, remarking that the puff-adders were brutes, and that he must have some pigs turned in to destroy them, which the pigs do by munching them up, apparently without unpleasant consequences to themselves, and then departed

on his errand, wending his way gingerly through the feathery black wattles. It did not take long, and he saw no puff-adders. When he had finished looking at the young trees, he returned, still walking delicately like Agag. On getting to the border of the plantation he paused to look at Bessie, who was some twenty paces from him, perched sideways on the low sod wall, and framed, as it were, in the full rich light of the setting sun. Her hat was off, for the sun had lost its burning force, and the hand that held it hung idly by her, while her eyes were fixed on the horizon flaming with all the varied glories of the African sunset. He gazed at her sweet face and lissom form, and some lines that he had read years before floated idly into his mind—

The little curls about her head
Were all her crown of gold,
Her delicate arms drooped downwards
In slender mould,
As white-veined leaves of lilies
Curve and fold.
She moved to measure of music,
As a swan sails the stream—

He had got as far as this when she turned and saw him, and he gave up the poetry in the presence of one who might well have inspired it.

"What are you looking at?" she said with a smile: "the sunset?"

"No; I was looking at you."

"Then you might have been better employed with the sunset," she answered, turning her head quickly. "Look at it! Did you ever see such a sunset? We sometimes get them like that at this time of year when the thunderstorms are about."

She was right; it was glorious. The heavy clouds which a couple of hours before had been rolling like celestial hearses across the azure deeps were now aflame with glory. Some of them glowed like huge castles wrapped in fire, others with the dull red heat of burning coal. The eastern sky was one sheet of burnished gold that slowly grew to red, and higher yet to orange and the faintest rose. To the left departing sunbeams rested lovingly on grey Quathlamba's crests, even firing the eternal snows that lay upon his highest peak, and writing once more upon their whiteness the record of another day fulfilled. Lower down the sky floated little clouds, flame-flakes fallen from the burning mass above, and on the earth beneath lay great depths of shadow barred with the brightness of the dying light.

John stood and gazed at it, and its living, glowing beauty seemed to fire his imagination, as it fired earth and heaven, in such sort that the torch of love lit upon his heart like the sunbeams on the mountain tops. Then from the celestial beauty of the skies he turned to look at the earthly beauty of the woman who sat there before him, and found that also fair. Whether it was the contemplation of the glories of Nature—for there is always a suspicion of melancholy in beautiful things—or whatever it was, her face had a touch of sadness on it that he had never seen before, and which certainly added to its charm as a shadow adds to the charm of the light.

“What are you thinking of, Bessie?” he asked.

She looked up, and he saw that her lips were quivering a little. “Well, do you know,” she said, “I was, oddly enough, thinking of my mother. I can only just remember her, a woman with a thin sweet face. I remember one evening she was sitting in front of a house just as the sun was setting like it is now, and I was playing by her, when suddenly she called me to her and kissed me, and then pointed to the red clouds

that were gathered in the sky, and said, 'I wonder if you will ever think of me, dear, when I have passed through those golden gates?' I did not understand what she meant then, but somehow I have remembered the words, and though she died so long ago I do often think of her;" and two large tears rolled down her face as she spoke.

Few men can bear to see a sweet and pretty woman in tears, and this little incident was too much for John, whose caution and doubts all went to the winds together.

"Bessie," he said, "don't cry, dear; please, don't! I can't bear to see you cry."

She looked up as though to remonstrate at his words, and then looked down again.

"Listen, Bessie," he went on awkwardly enough, "I have got something to say to you. I want to ask you if—if, in short, you will marry me. Wait a bit, don't say anything yet; you know me pretty well by now. I am no chicken, dear, and I have knocked about the world a good deal, and had one or two love affairs like other people. But, Bessie, I never met such a sweet woman, or, if you will let me say it, such a lovely woman as you, and if you will have me,

dear, I think that I shall be the luckiest man in South Africa;" and he stopped, not exactly knowing what else to say, and the time had not come for action, if indeed it was to come at all.

When she first realised the drift of his talk Bessie had flushed up to the eyes, and then the blood had sunk back to her breast, and left her as pale as a lily. She loved the man, and they were happy words to her, and she was satisfied with them, though perhaps some women might have thought that they left a good deal to be desired. But Bessie was not of an exacting nature.

At last she spoke.

"Are you sure," she said, "that you mean all this? I mean sometimes people say things of a sudden, upon an impulse, and then afterwards they wish that they never had been said. If that was so it would be rather awkward supposing I were to say 'yes,' you know."

"Of course I am sure," he said indignantly.

"You see," went on Bessie, poking at the sod wall with the stick she held in her hand, "perhaps in this place you might be putting an exaggerated value on me. You think I am pretty because you see nobody but Kafir and Boer wo-

men, and it would be the same with everything. I'm not fit to marry a man like you," she went on, with a sudden burst of distress; "I have never seen anything or anybody. I am nothing but an ignorant, half-educated farmer girl, with nothing to recommend me, and no fortune except my looks. You are different to me; you are a man of the world, and if ever you went back to England I should be a drag on you, and you would be ashamed of me and my colonial ways. If it had been Jess now, it would have been different, for she has more brains in her little finger than I have in my whole body."

Somehow this mention of Jess jarred upon John's nerves, and chilled him like a breath of cold wind on a hot day. He wanted to put Jess out of his mind just now.

"My dear Bessie," he broke in, "why do you suppose such things? I can assure you that, if you appeared in a London drawing-room, you would put most of the women in it into the shade. Not that there is much chance of my frequenting London drawing-rooms again," he added.

"Oh, yes! I may be good-looking; I don't say that I am not; but can't you understand I don't want you to marry me just because I am a pretty

woman, as the Kafirs marry their wives. If you marry me at all I want you to marry me because you care for *me*, the real *me*, not my eyes and my hair. Oh, I don't know what to answer you! I don't, indeed!" and she began to cry softly.

"Bessie, dear Bessie!" said John, who was pretty well beside himself by this time, "just tell me honestly—do you care about me? I am not worth much, I know, but if you do all this just goes for nothing," and he took her hand and drew her towards him, so that she half slipped, half got off the sod wall and stood face to face with him, for she was a tall woman, and they were very nearly of a height.

Twice she raised her beautiful eyes to his to answer, and twice her courage failed her, and then at last the truth broke from her almost with a cry:

"Oh, John, I love you with all my heart!"

And now I think that we may drop a veil over the rest of these proceedings, for there are some things that should be sacred, even from the pen of the historian, and the first transports of the love of a good woman is one of them.

Suffice it to say that they sat there side by side on that sod wall, and were as happy as

people ought to be under such circumstances, till the glory departed from the western sky and the world grew cold and pale, till the night came down and hid the mountains, and only the stars and they were left to look out across the dusky distances of the wilderness of plain.

Meanwhile a very different scene was being enacted up at the house half a mile away.

Not more than ten minutes after John and his lady-love had departed on that fateful walk to look at the young trees, Frank Muller's stalwart form, mounted on his great black horse, was to be seen leisurely advancing towards the blue gum avenue. Jantjé was lurking about between the stems of the trees in the peculiar fashion that is characteristic of the Hottentot, and which doubtless is bred into him after tens of centuries of tracking animals and hiding from foes. There he was, slipping from trunk to trunk, and gazing round him as though he expected each instant to discover the assegai of an ambushed foe or to hear the footfall of some savage beast of prey. There was absolutely no reason why he should be carrying on in this fashion; he was simply indulging his natural instincts where he thought

nobody would observe him. Life at Mooifontein was altogether too tame and civilised for Jantjé's taste, and he absolutely needed periodical recreations of this sort. Like a civilised child he longed for wild beasts and enemies, and if there were none handy he found a reflected satisfaction in making a pretence of their presence.

Presently, however, whilst they were yet a long way off, his quick ear caught the sound of the horse's footfalls, and he straightened himself and listened. Not satisfied with the results, he laid himself down, put his ear to the ground, and gave a guttural grunt of satisfaction.

"Baas Frank's black horse," he muttered to himself. "The black horse has a cracked heel, and one foot hits the ground more softly than the others. What is Baas Frank coming here for? After Missie [Bessie] I think. He would be mad if he knew that Missie went down to the plantation with Baas Niel just now. People go into plantations to kiss each other" (Jantjé was not far out there), "and it would make Baas Frank mad if he knew that. He would strike me if I told him, or I would tell him."

The horse's hoofs were getting near by now, so Jantjé slipped as easily and naturally as a

snake into a thick tuft of rank grass that grew between the blue gums, and waited. Nobody would have guessed that that tuft of grass hid a human being; not even a Boer would have guessed it, unless he had happened to walk right on to the spy, and then it would have been a chance but that the Hottentot would have managed to avoid being trodden on and escaped detection. There was, again, no reason why he should hide himself in this fashion, except that it pleased him to do so.

Presently the big horse approached, and the snakelike Hottentot raised his head ever so little and peered out with his beady black eyes through the strawlike grass stems. They fell on Muller's cold face. It was evident that he was in a reflective mood—in an angrily reflective mood. So absorbed was he that he nearly let his horse, which was also absorbed by the near prospect of a comfortable stall, put his foot into a big hole that a wandering antbear had amused himself on the previous night by digging right in the centre of the road.

“What is Baas Frank thinking of, I wonder?” said Jantjé to himself as horse and man passed within four feet of him. Then rising, he crossed

the road, and slipping round by a back way like a fox from a covert, was standing at the stable-door with a vacant and utterly unobservant expression of face some seconds before the black horse and its rider had reached the house.

“I will give them one more chance, just one more,” thought the handsome Boer, or rather half-breed (for it will be remembered that his mother was English), “and if they won’t take it, then let their fate be upon their own heads. Tomorrow I go to the *bymakaar* [meeting] at Paarde Kraal to take counsel with Paul Krüger and Pretorius, and the other ‘fathers of the land,’ as they call themselves. If I throw in my weight against rebellion there will be no rebellion; if I urge it there will be, and if Om Silas will not give me Bessie, and Bessie will not marry me, I will urge it even if it plunge the whole country into war from the Cape to Waterberg. Patriotism! Independence! Taxes!—that is what they all cry till they begin to believe it themselves. Bah! those are not the things that I would go to war for; but ambition and revenge, ah! that is another thing. I would kill them all if they stood in my way, all except Bessie. If war breaks out, who will hold up a hand to help the ‘verdomde Englesmann’? They

would all be afraid. And it is not my fault. Can I help it if I love that woman? Can I help it if my blood dries up with longing for her, and if I lie awake hour by hour of nights, ay, and weep—I, Frank Muller, who saw the murdered bodies of my father and my mother and shed no tear—because she hates me and will not look favourably upon me?

“Oh, woman! woman! They talk of ambition and of avarice, and of self-preservation as the keys of character and action, but what force is there to move us like a woman? A little thing, a weak fragile thing—a toy from which the rain will wash the paint and of which the rust will stop the working, and yet a thing that can shake the world and pour out blood like water, and bring down sorrow like the rain. So! I stand by the boulder. A touch and it will go crashing down the mountain-side so that the world hears it. Shall I send it? It is all one to me. Let Bessie and Om Silas judge. I would slaughter every Englishman in the Transvaal to gain Bessie—ay! and every Boer too, and throw all the natives in;” and he laughed aloud, and struck the great black horse, making it plunge and caper gallantly.

“And then,” he went on, giving his ambition wing, “when I have got Bessie, and we have kicked all these Englishmen out of the land, in a very few years I shall rule this country, and what next? Why, then I will stir up the Dutch feeling in Natal and in the old colony, and we will push the Englishmen back into the sea, make a clean sweep of the natives, only keeping enough for servants, and have a united South Africa, like that poor silly man Burgers used to prate of, but did not know how to bring about. A united Dutch South Africa and Frank Muller to rule it! Well, such things have been, and may be again. Give me forty years of life and strength, and we shall see——”

Just then he reached the verandah of the house, and, dismissing his secret ambitions from his mind, Frank Muller dismounted and entered. In the sitting-room he found Silas Croft reading a newspaper.

“Good-day, Om Silas,” he said, extending his hand.

“Good-day, Meinheer Frank Muller,” replied the old man very coldly, for John had told him of the incident at the shooting-party which had

so nearly ended fatally, and though he had made no remark he had formed his own conclusions.

"What are you reading in the 'Volkstem,' Om Silas—about the Bezuidenhout affair?"

"No; what was that?"

"It was that the volk are rising against you English, that is all. The sheriff seized Bezuidenhout's waggon in execution of taxes, and put it up to sale at Potchefstroom. But the volk kicked the auctioneer off the waggon and hunted him round the town; and now Governor Lanyon is sending Raaf down with power to swear in special constables and enforce the law at Potchefstroom. He might as well try to stop a river by throwing stones. Let me see, the big meeting at Paarde Kraal was to have been on the fifteenth of December, now it is to be on the eighth, and then we shall see if it will be peace or war."

"Peace or war?" answered the old man testily. "That has been the cry for years. How many big meetings have there been since Shepstone annexed the country? Six, I think. And what has come of it all? Just nothing but talk. And what can come of it? Suppose the Boers did fight, what would the end of it be? They would be beaten, and a lot of people would be killed,

and that would be the end of it. You don't suppose that England would give in to a handful of Boers, do you? What did General Wolseley say the other day at the dinner at Potchefstroom? Why, that the country would never be given up, because no Government, Conservative, Liberal, or Radical, would dare to do such a thing. And now this new Gladstone Government has telegraphed the same thing, so what is the use of all the talk and childishness? Tell me that, Frank Muller."

Muller laughed as he answered, "You are all very simple people, you English. Don't you know that a government is like a woman who cries 'No, no, no,' and kisses you all the time? If there is noise enough your British Government will eat its words and give Wolseley, and Shepstone, and Bartle Frere, and Lanyon, and all of them the lie. This is a bigger business than you think for, Om Silas. Of course all these meetings and talk are got up. The people are angry because of the English way of dealing with the natives, and because they have to pay taxes; and they think that, now that you English have paid their debts and smashed up Sikukuni and Cete-wayo, they would like to have the land back.

They were glad enough for you to take it at first; now it is another matter. But still that is not much. If they were left to themselves nothing would come of it except talk, for many of them are very glad that the land should be English. But the men who pull the strings are down in the Cape. They want to drive every Englishman out of South Africa. When Shepstone annexed the Transvaal he turned the scale against the Dutch element and broke up the plans they have been laying for years to make a big anti-English republic of the whole country. If the Transvaal remains English there is an end of their hopes, for only the Free State remains, and that is hemmed in. That is why they are so angry, and that is why their tools are stirring the people up. They mean to make them fight now, and I think that they will succeed. If the Boers win the day they will declare themselves; if not, you will hear nothing of them, and the Boers will bear the brunt of it. They are very cunning people the Cape 'patriots,' but they look well after themselves."

Silas Croft looked troubled and made no answer, and Frank Muller rose and stared out of the window.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRANK MULLER SHOWS HIS HAND.

PRESENTLY Muller turned round. "Do you know why I have told you all this, Om Silas?" he asked.

"No."

"Because I want you to understand that you and all the Englishmen in this country are in a very dangerous position. The war is coming, and whether it goes for you or against you, you must suffer. You Englishmen have many enemies. You have got all the trade and own nearly half the land, and you are always standing up for the black people, whom the Boers hate. It will go hard with you if there is a war. You will be shot and your houses will be burnt, and if you lose the day, those who escape will be driven out of the country. It will be the Transvaal for the Transvaalers, then, and Africa for the Africanders."

"Well, Frank Muller, and if all this should come to pass, what of it? What are you driving

at, Frank Muller? You don't show me your hand like this for nothing."

The Boer laughed. "Of course I don't, Om Silas. Well, if you want to know, I will tell you what I mean. I mean that I alone can protect you and your place and people in the bad times that are coming. I have more influence in the land than you know of. Perhaps even, I could stave off the war, and if it suited me to do so I would do it. At the least I could keep you from being harmed, that I know. But I have my price, Om Silas, as we all have, and it must be money down and no credit."

"I don't understand you and your dark sayings," said the old man coldly. "I am a straightforward man, and if you will tell me what you mean I will give you my answer; if not, I don't see the good of our going on talking."

"Very well; I will tell you what I mean. I mean *Bessie*. I mean that I love your niece and want to marry her—ay, I mean to marry her by fair means or foul—and that she will have nothing to say to me."

"And what have I to do with that, Frank Muller? The girl is her own mistress. I cannot dispose of her in marriage, even if I wanted to,

as though she were a colt or an ox. You must plead your own suit and take your own answer."

"I have pleaded my suit and I have got my answer," answered the Boer with passion. "Don't you understand she will have nothing to say to me? She is in love with that damned rooibaasje Niel whom you have brought up here. She is in love with him, I say, and will not look at me."

"Ah," replied Silas Croft calmly, "is it so? Then she shows very good taste, for John Niel is an honest man, Frank Muller, and you are not. Listen to me," he went on, with a sudden outburst of passion; "I tell you that you are a dishonourable man and a villain. I tell you that you murdered the Hottentot Jantjé's father, mother, and uncle in cold blood when you were yet a lad. I tell you that the other day you tried to murder John Niel, pretending to mistake him for a buck! And now you, who petitioned for this country to be taken over by the Queen, and have gone round singing out your loyalty at the top of your voice, come and tell me that you are plotting to bring about an insurrection and to plunge the land into war, and ask me for Bessie as the price of your protection! And now I will tell you something in answer, Frank Muller," and the old man rose up,

his keen eyes flashing in wrath, and, straightening his bent frame, pointed towards the door. "Go out of that door and never come through it again. I rely upon God and the English nation to protect me, and not on such as you, and I would rather see my dear Bessie dead in her coffin than married to a knave and traitor and a murderer like Frank Muller. Go!"

The Boer turned white with fury as he listened. Twice he tried to speak and failed, and when the words did come they were so choked and laden with passion as to be scarcely audible. When thwarted he was liable to these accesses of rage, and they, figuratively speaking, spoilt his character. Could he have kept his head, he would have been a perfect and triumphant villain, but as it was, the carefully planned and audacious rascality of years was always apt to be swept away by the sudden gale of his furious passion. It was in such an outburst of rage that he had assaulted John in the inn yard at Wakkerstroom, and thereby put him on his guard against him, and now it mastered him once more.

"Very well, Silas Croft," he said at last, "I will go; but mark this, I will come back, and when I come it shall be with men armed with

rifles. I will burn this pretty place of yours, that you are so proud of, over your head, and I will kill you and your friend the Englishman, and take Bessie away, and very soon she shall be glad enough to marry Frank Muller; but then I will not marry her—no, not if she goes on her knees to me—and she shall go on her knees often enough. We will see then what God and the English nation will do to protect you. God and the English nation! Call on the sheep and the horses; call on the rocks and the trees, and you will get a better answer.”

“Go!” thundered the old man, “or by the God you blaspheme I will put a bullet through you,” and he reached towards a rifle that hung over the mantelpiece, “or my Kafirs shall whip you off the place.”

Frank Muller waited for no more. He turned and went. It was dark now, but there was still some light in the sky at the end of the blue gum avenue, and as he rode away against it he made out Bessie’s tall and graceful form softly outlined upon the darkening night. John had left her to see about some pressing matter connected with the farm, and there she stood, filled with the great joy of a woman who has found her love,

and loth as yet to break its spell by entering again into the daily round of common life.

There she stood, a type and symbol of all that is beautiful and gracious in this rough world, the lovelights shining in her blue eyes and thoughts of happy gratitude to the Giver of all good rising from her heart to Heaven, drawn up thither, as it were, by the warmth of her pure passion, as the dew mists of the morning are drawn upward by the sun. There she was so good, so happy, and so sweet; an answer to the world's evil, a symbol of the world's joy, and an incarnation of the world's beauty! Who but a merciful and almighty Father can create children such as she, so lovely, so lovable, and set them on the world as He sets the stars upon the sky to light it and make beholders think of holy things, and who but man could have the heart to turn such as she to the base uses to which they are daily turned?

Presently she heard the horse's hoofs, and looked up, so that the faint light fell full upon her face, idealising it, and making its passion-breathing beauty seem more of Heaven than of earth. There was some look upon it, some indefinable light that day—such is the power that love has to infuse all human things with the tint

of his own splendour—that it went even to the heart of the wild and evil man who adored her with the deep and savage force of his dark nature. For a moment he paused half regretful, half afraid. Was it well to meddle with her, and to build up plans for her overthrow and that of all she clung to? Would it not be better to let her be, to go his way and leave her to go hers in peace? She did not look quite like a woman standing there, but more like something belonging to another world, some subject of a higher power. Men of powerful but undisciplined intellect like Frank Muller are never entirely free from superstition, however free they may be from religion, and he grew superstitious as he was apt to do. Might there not be an unknown penalty for treading such a flower as that into the mire—into mire mixed perchance with the blood of those she loved?

For a few seconds he hesitated. Should he throw up the whole thing, leave the rebellion to look after itself, marry one of Hans Coetzee's daughters, and trek to the old colony, or Bechuanaland, or anywhere? His hand began to tighten on his bridle-rein and the horse to answer to the pressure. As a first step towards it he

would turn away to the left and avoid her, when suddenly the thought of his successful rival flashed into his mind. What, leave her with that man? Never! He had rather kill her with his own hand. In another second he had sprung from his horse, and, before she had guessed who it was, was standing face to face with her. The strength of his jealous desire overpowered him.

"Ah, I thought he had come after Missie," said Jantjé, who, pursuing his former tactics, was once more indulging his passion for slinking about behind trees and in tufts of grass. "Now what will Missie say?"

"How are you, Bessie?" said Muller in a quiet voice, but she, looking into his face, saw that it belied his voice. It was alive with evil passion that seemed to make it positively lurid, an effect that its undoubted beauty only intensified.

"I am quite well, thank you, Mr. Muller," she answered as she began to move homewards, commanding her voice as well as she could, but feeling dreadfully frightened and lonely. She knew something of her admirer's character, and feared to be left alone with him so far from any help, for nobody was about now, and they were more than three hundred yards from the house.

He stood before her so that she could not pass without actually pushing by him. "Why are you in such a hurry?" he said. "You were standing still enough just now."

"It is time for me to be getting in. I want to see about the supper."

"The supper can wait awhile, Bessie, and I cannot wait. I am going off to Paarde Kraal tomorrow at daybreak, and I want to say good-bye to you first."

"Good-bye," she said, more frightened than ever at his curious constrained manner, and she held out her hand.

He took it and retained it.

"Please let me go," she said.

"Not till you have heard what I have to say. Look here, Bessie, I love you with all my heart. I know you think I am only a Boer, but I am more than that. I have been to the Cape and seen the world. I have brains, and see and understand things, and if you will marry me I will lift you up. You shall be one of the greatest ladies in Africa, though I am only plain Frank Muller now. Great things are going to happen in the country, and I shall be at the head of them, or near it. No, don't try to get away. I

tell you I love you, you don't know how. I am dying for you. Oh! can't you believe me, my darling! my darling! Yes, I *will* kiss you," and in an agony of passion, that her resistance only fired the more, he flung his strong arms round her and drew her to his breast, fight as she would.

But at this opportune moment an unexpected diversion occurred, of which the hidden Jantjé was the cause. Seeing that matters were getting serious, and being afraid to show himself lest Frank Muller should kill him then and there, as he would indeed have been quite capable of doing, he hit upon another expedient, to the service of which he brought a ventriloquistic power which is not uncommon among natives. Suddenly the silence was broken by a frightful and prolonged wail that seemed to shape itself into the word "Frank," and to proceed from the air just above the struggling Bessie's head. The effect produced upon Muller was something wonderful.

"Allemachter!" he cried, looking up, "it is my mother's voice!"

"*Frank!*" wailed the voice again, and he let go of Bessie in his perplexity and fear, and turned round to try and discover whence the

sound proceeded—a circumstance that the young lady took advantage of to beat a rapid if not very dignified retreat.

“*Frank! Frank! Frank!*” wailed and howled the voice now overhead, now on this side, now on that, till at last Muller, thoroughly mystified and feeling his superstitious fears rising apace as the moaning sound flitted about beneath the dark arch of the gum-trees, made a rush for his horse, which was standing snorting and trembling in every limb. It is almost as easy to work upon the superstitious fears of a dog or a horse as upon those of a man, but Muller, not being aware of this, took the animal’s alarm as a clear indication of the uncanny nature of the voice. With a single bound he sprang into his saddle, and as he did so the woman’s voice wailed out once more—

“*Frank*, thou shalt die in blood as I did, Frank!”

Muller turned livid with fear, and the cold perspiration streamed from his face. He was a bold man enough in a general way, but this was too much for his nerves.

“It is my mother’s voice, it is her very words!” he called out aloud, and then, dashing his spurs

into his horse's flanks, he went like a flash away from the accursed spot; nor did he draw rein till he came to his own place ten miles away. Twice the horse fell in the darkness, for there was no moon, the second time throwing him heavily, but he only dragged it up with a curse, and springing into the saddle again fled on as before.

Thus did the man who did not hesitate to plot and to execute the cruel slaughter of unoffending men cower beneath the fancied echo of a dead woman's voice! Truly human nature is full of contradictions.

When the thunder of the horse's hoofs grew faint Jantjé emerged from one of his hiding-places, and, throwing himself down in the centre of the dusty road, kicked and rolled with delight, shaking all the while with an inward joy that his habits of caution would not permit him to give audible vent to. "His mother's voice, his mother's words," he quoted to himself. "How should he know that Jantjé remembers the old woman's voice—ay, and the words that the devil in her spoke too? Hee! hee! hee!"

Finally he departed to eat his supper of beef, which he had cut off an unfortunate ox that had that morning expired of a mysterious complication

of diseases, filled with a happy sense that he had not lived that day in vain.

Bessie fled without stopping till she reached the orange-trees in front of the verandah, where, reassured by the lights from the windows, she paused to consider. Not that she was troubled by Jantjé's mysterious howling; indeed, she was too preoccupied to give it a second thought. What she was debating was whether she should say anything about her encounter with Frank Muller. Young ladies are not, as a rule, too fond of informing their husbands or lovers that somebody has kissed them; first, because they know it will force them to make a disturbance and possibly to place themselves in a ridiculous position; and, secondly, because they fear lest suspicious man might take the story with a grain of salt, and might even suggest that they, the kissed, were themselves to blame. Both these reasons presented themselves to Bessie's practical mind, and also the further one, namely, that he had not kissed her after all; so on a rapid review of the whole case she came to the decision to say nothing to John about it, and only enough to her uncle to get him to forbid Frank Muller the house—an unnecessary precaution, as the reader will

remember. Then, after pausing for a few seconds to pick a branch of orange blossom and to become herself generally, which, not being hysterically inclined, she very soon did, she quietly entered the house as though nothing had happened. The very first person she met was John himself, who had come in by the back way. He laughed at her orange-blossom bouquet, and said that it was most appropriate, and then proceeded to embrace her tenderly in the passage; and indeed he would have been a poor sort of lover if he had not. It was exactly at this juncture that old Silas Croft happened to open the sitting-room door and come full upon this tender and attractive tableau.

“Well, I never!” said the old gentleman. “What is the meaning of all this, Bessie?”

Of course there was nothing for it but to come in and explain the facts of the case, which John did with much humming and ha-ing and a general awkwardness of manner that baffles description, while Bessie stood by, her hand upon her lover’s shoulder, blushing as red as any rose.

The old man listened in silence till John had finished, a smile upon his face and a kindly twinkle in his keen eyes.

"So," he said, "that is what you young people have been after, is it? I suppose that you want to enlarge your interests in the farm, eh, John? Well, upon my word, I don't blame you; you might have gone further and fared worse. These sort of things never come singly, it seems. I had another request for your hand, my dear, only this afternoon, from that scoundrel Frank Muller, of all men in the world," and his face darkened as he said the name. "I sent him off with a flea in his ear, I can tell you. Had I known then what I know now, I should have referred him to John. There, there! He is a bad man, and a dangerous man, but let him be. He is taking plenty of rope, and he will hang himself one of these days. Well, my dears, this is the best bit of news that I have heard for many a long day. It is time you got married, both of you, for it is not right for man to live alone, or woman either. I have done it all my life, and that is the conclusion I have come to after thinking the matter over for somewhere about fifty years. Yes, you have my consent and my blessing too, and you will have something more one day before so very long. Take her, John, take her. I have led a rough life, but I have seen something of women for all

that, and I tell you that there is not a sweeter or a better or a prettier woman in South Africa than Bessie Croft, and in wanting to marry her you have shown your sense. God bless you both, my dears; and now, Bessie, come and give your old uncle a kiss. I hope that you won't let John quite drive me out of your head, that's all, for you see, my dear, having no children of my own, I have managed to get very fond of you in the last twelve years or so."

Bessie came and kissed the old man tenderly.

"No, uncle," she said, "neither John nor anybody nor anything in the world can do that," and it was evident from her manner that she meant what she said. Bessie had a large heart, and was not at all the person to let her lover drive her uncle and benefactor out of his share of it.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOHN TO THE RESCUE.

THE important domestic events described in the last chapter took place on December 7, 1880, and for the next twelve days or so everything went as happily at Mooifontein as things should go under the circumstances. Every day Silas Croft beamed with a more enlarged geniality in his satisfaction at the turn that things had taken, and every day John found cause to congratulate himself more and more on the issue of his bold venture towards matrimony. Now that he came to be on such intimate terms with his betrothed, he perceived a hundred charms and graces in her character which he had never suspected before. Bessie was like a flower: the more she basked in the light and warmth of her love the more her character opened and unfolded, shedding perfumed sweetness around her and revealing unguessed charms. It is so with all women, and more especially with a woman of her stamp,

whom Nature has made to love and be loved as maid and wife and mother. Her undoubted personal beauty also shared in this development, her fair face taking a richer hue and her eyes an added depth and meaning. She was in every respect, save one, all that a man could desire in his wife, and even the exception would have stood to her credit with many men. It was this: she was not an intellectual woman, although she certainly possessed more than the ordinary share of intelligence and work-a-day common sense. Now John was a decidedly intellectual man, and, what is more, he highly appreciated that rare quality in the other sex. But, after all, when one is just engaged to a sweet and lovely woman, one does not think much about her intellect. Those sort of reflections come afterwards.

And so they sauntered hand in hand through the sunny days, and were exceedingly happy. Least of all did they allow the rumours which occasionally reached them from the great Boer gathering at Paarde Kraal to disturb their serenity. There had been so many of these rumours of rebellion that folk were getting to regard them as a chronic state of affairs.

"Oh, the Boers!" said Bessie with a pretty

toss of her golden head, as they were sitting one morning on the verandah. "I am sick to death of hearing about the Boers and all their got-up talk. I know what it is; it is just an excuse for them to go away from their farms and wives and children and idle about at these great meetings, and drink square-face with their mouths full of big words. You see what Jess says in her last letter. People in Pretoria believe that it is all nonsense from beginning to end, and I think they are perfectly right."

"By the way, Bessie," asked John, "have you written to Jess telling her of our engagement?"

"Oh yes, I wrote some days ago, but the letter only went yesterday. She will be pleased to hear about it. Dear old Jess, I wonder when she means to come home again. She has been away long enough."

John made no answer, but went on smoking his pipe in silence, wondering if Jess would be pleased. He did not understand her yet. She had gone away just as he was beginning to understand her.

Presently he observed Jantjé sneaking about between the orange-trees as though he wished to call attention to himself. Had he not wanted to

do so he would have moved from one to the other in such a way that nobody could have seen him. His partial and desultory appearances indicated that he was on view.

"Come out of those trees, you little rascal, and stop slipping about like a snake in a stone wall!" shouted John. "What is it you want—wages?"

Thus adjured, Jantjé advanced and sat down on the path as usual, in the full glare of the sun.

"No, Baas," he said, "it is not wages. They are not due yet."

"What is it, then?"

"No, Baas, it is this. The Boers have declared war on the English Government, and they have eaten up the rooibaatjes at Bronker's Spruit, near Middelburg. Joubert shot them all there the day before yesterday."

"What!" shouted John, letting his pipe fall in his astonishment. "Stop, though, that must be a lie. You say near Middelburg, the day before yesterday: that would be December 20. When did you hear this?"

"At daybreak, Baas. A Basutu told me."

"Then there is an end of it. The news could

not have got here in thirty-eight hours. What do you mean by coming to me with such a tale?"

The Hottentot smiled. "It is quite true, Baas. Bad news flies like a bird," and he picked himself up and slipped off to his work.

Notwithstanding the apparent impossibility of the thing, John was considerably disturbed, knowing the extraordinary speed with which news does travel among Kafirs, more swiftly, indeed, than the swiftest mounted messenger can bear it. Leaving Bessie, who was also somewhat alarmed, he went in search of Silas Croft, and, finding him in the garden, told him what Jantjé had said. The old man did not know what to make of the tale, but, remembering Frank Muller's threats, he shook his head.

"If there is any truth in it, that villain Muller has a hand in it," he said. "I'll go to the house and see Jantjé. Give me your arm, John."

He obeyed, and, on getting to the top of the steep path, perceived the stout figure of old Hans Coetzee, who had been his host at the shooting-party, ambling along on his fat little pony.

"Ah," said old Silas, "here is the man who will tell us if there is anything in it all."

“Good-day, Om Coetzee, good-day!” he shouted out in his stentorian tone. “What news do you bring with you?”

The jolly-looking Boer rolled awkwardly off his pony before answering, and, throwing the reins over its head, came to meet them.

“Allemachter, Om Silas, it is bad news. You have heard of the ‘bymakaar’ [meeting] at Paarde Kraal. Frank Muller wanted me to go, but I would not, and now they have declared war on the British Government and sent a proclamation to Lanyon. There will be fighting, Om Silas, the land will run with blood, and the poor rooibaatjes will be shot down like buck.”

“The poor Boers, you mean,” growled John, who did not like to hear Her Majesty’s army talked of in terms of regretful pity.

Om Coetzee shook his head with the air of one who knew all about it, and then turned an attentive ear to Silas Croft’s version of Jantjé’s story.

“Allemachter!” groaned Coetzee, “what did I tell you? The poor rooibaatjes shot down like buck, and the land running with blood. And now that Frank Muller will draw me into it, and I shall have to go and shoot the poor rooibaatjes;

and I can't miss, try as hard as I will, I *can't* miss. And when we have shot them all I suppose that Burgers will come back, and he is 'kransick' [mad]. Yes, yes; Lanyon is bad, but Burgers is worse," and the comfortable old gentleman groaned aloud at the troubles in which he foresaw he would be involved, and finally took his departure by a bridle-path over the mountain, saying that, as things had turned out, he would not like it to be known that he had been calling on an Englishman. "They might think that I was not loyal to the 'land,'" he added in explanation; "the land which we Boers bought with our blood, and which we shall win back with our blood, whatever the poor 'pack oxen' of rooibaatjes try to do. Ah, those poor, poor rooibaatjes, one Boer will drive away twenty of them and make them run across the veldt, if they can run in those great knapsacks of theirs, with the tin things hanging round them like the pots and kettles to the bed-plank of a waggon. What says the Holy Book, 'One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one, and at the rebuke of five shall ye flee,' at least I think that is it. The dear Lord knew what was coming when He wrote it. He was thinking of the Boers and the poor

rooibaatjes," and he departed, shaking his head sadly.

"I am glad that the old gentleman has made tracks," said John, "for if he had gone on much longer about the poor English soldiers he would have fled at the rebuke of one, I can tell him."

"John," said Silas Croft suddenly, "you must go up to Pretoria and fetch Jess. Mark my words, the Boers will besiege Pretoria, and if we don't get her down at once she will be shut up there."

"Oh no," cried Bessie, in sudden alarm, "I cannot let John go."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like that, Bessie, when your sister is in danger," answered her uncle rather sternly; "but there, I dare say that it is natural. I will go myself. Where is Jantjé? I shall want the Cape cart and the four grey horses."

"No, uncle dear, John shall go. I was not thinking what I was saying. It seemed—a little hard at first."

"Of course I must go," said John. "Don't fret, dear, I shall be back in five days. Those four horses can go sixty miles a day for that time, and more. They are fat as butter, and there is lots of grass along the road if I can't get

forage for them. Besides, the cart will be nearly empty, so I can carry a muid of mealies and fifty bundles of forage with me. I will take that Zulu boy, Mouti [medecine], with me. He does not know much about horses, but he is a plucky fellow, and would stick by one at a pinch. One can't rely on Jantjé; he is always sneaking off somewhere, and would be sure to get drunk just as one wanted him."

"Yes, yes, John, that's right, that's right," said the old man. "I will go and see about having the horses got up and the wheels greased. Where is the castor-oil, Bessie? There is nothing like castor-oil for these patent axles. You ought to be off in an hour. You had better sleep at Luck's to-night; you might get farther, but Luck's is a good place to stop, and they will look after you well there, and you can be off by three in the morning and be at Heidelberg by ten o'clock to-morrow night, and in Pretoria by the next afternoon," and he bustled off to make the necessary preparations.

"Oh, John," said Bessie, beginning to cry, "I don't like your going at all among all those wild Boers. You are an English officer, and if they find you out they will shoot you. You don't

know what brutes some of them are when they think it safe to be so. Oh, John, John, I can't bear your going."

"Cheer up, my dear," said John, "and for Heaven's sake stop crying, for I can't bear it. I must go. Your uncle would never forgive me if I didn't, and, what is more, I should never forgive myself. There is nobody else to go, and we can't leave Jess to be shut up there in Pretoria—for months perhaps. As for the risk, of course there is a bit of a risk, but I must take it. I am not afraid of risks—at least I used not to be, but you have made a bit of a coward of me, Bessie dear. There, give me a kiss, old girl, and come and help me to pack my things. Please God I shall get back all right, and Jess with me, in a week from now."

Whereon Bessie, being a sensible and eminently practical young woman, dried her tears, and with a cheerful face, albeit her heart was heavy enough, set to work with a will to make every preparation she could think of. The few clothes John was going to take with him were packed in a Gladstone bag, and the box that was arranged underneath the movable seat in the Cape cart was filled with the tinned provisions

which are so much used in South Africa, and all the other little arrangements, small in themselves, but of such infinite importance to the traveller in a wild country, were duly attended to by her careful hands. Then came a hurried meal, and before it was swallowed the cart was at the door, with Jantjé hanging as usual on to the heads of the two front horses, and the stalwart Zulu, or rather Swazi boy, Mouti, whose sole luggage appeared to consist of a bundle of assegais and sticks wrapped up in a grass mat, and who, hot as it was, was enveloped in a vast military great-coat, lounging placidly alongside.

"Good-bye, John, dear John," said Bessie, kissing him again and again, and striving to keep back the tears that, do what she could, would gather in her blue eyes. Good-bye, my love."

"God bless you, dearest," he said simply, kissing her in answer; "good-bye, Mr. Croft. I hope to see you again in a week," and he was in the cart and had gathered up the long and intricate-looking reins. Jantjé let go the horses' heads and gave a whoop. Mouti, giving up stargazing, suddenly became an animated being and scrambled into the cart with surprising alacrity; the horses sprang forward at a hand gallop, and

were soon hidden from Bessie's dim sight in a cloud of dust. Poor Bessie, it was a hard trial, and now that John had gone and her tears could not distress him, she went into her room and gave way to them freely enough.

John reached Luck's, an establishment on the Pretoria road that happily combined the characteristics of an inn, a shop, and a farm-house, such as are to be met with in sparsely populated countries. It was not an inn and not a farm-house, strictly speaking, nor was it altogether a shop, though there was a "store" attached. If the traveller was anxious to obtain accommodation for man and beast at a place of this stamp he has to proceed warily, so to speak, lest he should be requested to move on. He must advance, hat in hand, and ask to be taken in as a favour, as many a high-handed traveller, accustomed to the obsequious attentions of "mine host," has learnt to his cost. There is no such dreadful autocrat as your half-and-half innkeeper in South Africa, and then he is so completely master of the situation. "If you don't like it, go and be d—d to you," is his simple answer to the remonstrances of the infuriated voyager. And then you must either knock under and look as though

you liked it, or trek on into the "unhostelled" wilderness. On this occasion, however, John fared well enough. To begin with, he knew the owners of this place, who were very civil people if approached in a humble spirit, and, furthermore, he found everybody in such a state of unpleasurable excitement that they were only too glad to get another Englishman to talk matters over with. Not that their information amounted to much, however. There was a rumour of the Bronker's Spruit disaster and other rumours of the investment of Pretoria, and of the advance of large bodies of Boers to take possession of the pass over the Drakensberg, known as Laing's Nek, but there was no definite intelligence.

"You won't get into Pretoria," said one melancholy man, "so it's no use trying. The Boers will just catch you and kill you, and there will be an end of it. You had better leave the girl to look after herself and go back to Mooifontein."

But this was not John's view of the matter. "Well," he said, "at any rate I'll have a try." Indeed, he had a sort of bull-dog sentiment about him that led him to believe that, if he made up his mind to do a thing, he would do it somehow, unless he should be physically incapacitated by

circumstances beyond his own control. It is wonderful how far a mood of this sort will take a man. Indeed, it is the widespread possession of this sentiment that has made England what she is. Now it is beginning to die down and be legislated out of our national character, and the results are already commencing to appear in the incipient decay of our power. We cannot govern Ireland. It is beyond us; let Ireland have Home Rule! We cannot cope with our Imperial responsibilities; let them be cast off; and so on. The Englishmen of fifty years ago did not talk like this. Well, every nation becomes emasculated sooner or later, that seems to be the universal fate; and it appears that it is our lot to be emasculated, not by the want of law but by a plethora of it. This country was made, not by Governments, but mostly in despite of them by the independent efforts of a series of individuals. The tendency nowadays is to merge the individual in the Government, and to limit and even forcibly destroy personal enterprise and responsibility. Everything is to be legislated for or legislated against. The system is only in its bud as yet. When it blooms, if it is ever allowed to bloom, the empire will lose touch of its individual atoms

and become a vast soulless machine, which will first get out of order, then break down, and, last of all, break up. We owe more to sturdy, determined, unconvinced Englishmen like John Niel than we realise, or, perhaps, should be willing to acknowledge in these enlightened days. "Long live the Caucus!" that is the cry of the nineteenth century. But what will Englishmen cry in the twentieth?

John was off again on his perilous journey more than an hour before dawn on the following morning. Nobody was up at the place, and as it was practically impossible to arouse the slumbering Kafirs from the various holes and corners where they were taking their rest—for a Kafir hates the cold of the dawning—Mouti and he had to harness the horses and get them inspanned without assistance, and an awkward job it was in the dark. At last, however, everything was ready, and, as the bill had been paid overnight, there was nothing to wait for, so they clambered into the cart and made a start. Before they had proceeded forty yards, however, John heard a voice calling to him to stop. He did so, and presently, holding a lighted candle which burnt without a flicker in the still damp air, and draped from

head to foot in a dingy-looking blanket, appeared the male Cassandra of the previous evening.

He advanced slowly and with dignity, as became a prophet, and at length reached the side of the cart, where the sight of his illuminated figure and the dingy blanket over his head nearly made the horses run away.

"What is it?" said John testily, for he was in no mood for delay.

"I thought I'd just get up to tell you," replied the draped form, "that I was quite sure that I am right, and that the Boers will shoot you. I should not like you to say afterwards that I have not warned you," and he held up the candle so that the light fell on John's face, and gazed at it in fond farewell.

"Curse it all," said John in a fury, "if that was all you had to say you might have kept in bed," and he brought down his lash on the wheelers and away they went with a bound, putting out the prophet's candle and nearly knocking the prophet himself backwards into the sluit.

CHAPTER XV.

A ROUGH JOURNEY.

THE four greys were fresh horses, in good condition and with a light load behind them, so, notwithstanding the bad condition of the tracks which they call roads in South Africa, John made good progress.

By eleven o'clock that day he had reached Standerton, a little town upon the Vaal, not far from which he was destined, had he but known it, to meet with a sufficiently striking experience. Here he obtained confirmation of the Bronker's Spruit disaster, and listened with set face and blazing eyes to the tale of treachery and death which was, as he said, without a parallel in the annals of civilised war. But, after all, what does it matter?—a little square of neglected* graves

* This word is used advisedly. About a year ago a gentleman whose home is in the Transvaal wrote to ask me to call public attention to the condition of the graves of those who fell at Bronker's Spruit, which he described as shocking. I am not aware, however, if anything has since been done to amend this state of things.—AUTHOR.

at Bronker's Spruit, a few more widows, and a hundred or so of orphans. England, by her Government, answered the question plainly—it matters very little.

At Standerton John was again warned that it would be impossible for him to make his way through the Boers at Heidelberg, a town about sixty miles from Pretoria, where the Triumvirate, Krüger, Pretorius, and Joubert, had proclaimed the Republic. But he answered as before, that he must go on till he was stopped, and inspanning his horses set forward again, a little comforted by the news that the Bishop of Pretoria, who was hurrying up to rejoin his family, had passed through a few hours before, also intent upon running the blockade, and that if he drove fast he might overtake him.

On he went, hour after hour, over the great deserted plain, but he did not succeed in catching up the Bishop. About forty miles from Standerton he saw a waggon standing by the roadside, and halted to see if he could get any information from its driver. But on investigation it became clear that the waggon had been looted of the provisions and goods with which it was loaded and the oxen driven off. Nor was this

the only evidence of violence. Across the dissel-boom of the waggon, the hands still clasping a long bamboo whip, as though he had been trying to defend himself with it, lay the dead body of the native driver. His face, John noticed, was so composed and peaceful, that had it not been for the attitude and a neat little blue hole in the forehead, one might have thought he was asleep and not dead.

At sunset John outspanned his now flagging horses by the roadside, and gave them each a couple of bundles of forage from the store that he had brought with him. Whilst they were eating it, leaving Mouti to keep an eye to them, he went some way off and sat down on a big anthheap to think. It was a wild and melancholy scene that stretched away before and behind him. Miles upon miles of plain, rolling east and west and north and south, like the billows of a frozen sea, only broken, far along the Heidelberg road, by some hills, known as Rooi Koppies. Nor was this all. Overhead was blazing and burning one of those remarkable sunsets which are sometimes seen in the South African summer time. The sky was full of lowering clouds, and the sullen orb of the setting sun had stained them perfectly

blood-red. Blood-red they floated through the ominous sky, and blood-red their shadows lay upon the grass. Even the air seemed red. It looked as though earth and heaven had been steeped in blood; and, fresh as John was from the sight of the dead driver, his ears yet tingling with the tale of Bronker's Spruit, it is not to be wondered at that the suggestive sight oppressed him seated in that lonely waste, with no company except the melancholy "*kakara-kakara*" of an old black koran hidden away somewhere in the grass. He was not much given to that sort of thing, but he did begin to wonder whether this was the last journey of all the many he had made during the past twenty years, and if a Boer bullet was about to solve the mystery of life and death for him.

And then he got to the stage of depression that most people have made acquaintance with at one time or another, when one begins to ask, "What is the use of it? Why were we born? What good do we do here? Why should we be (as the majority of mankind doubtless are) mere animals laden up with sorrows till at last our poor backs break? Is God powerful or powerless? If powerful, why did He not let us sleep in peace, without setting us here to taste of every pain and

mortification, to become acquainted with every grief, and then to perish miserably?" Old questions these, which the sprightly critic justly condemns as morbid and futile, and not to be dangled before a merry world of make-believe. And perhaps he is right. It is better to play at marbles on a sepulchre than to lift the lid and peep inside. But, for all that, they will arise when we sit alone at even in our individual wildernesses, surrounded, perhaps, by mementoes of our broken hopes and tokens of our beloved dead, strewn about us like the bleaching bones of the wild game on the veldt, and in spirit watch the red sun of our existence sinking towards the vapoury horizon. They *will* come even to the sanguine successful man. One cannot always play at marbles; the lid of the sepulchre will sometimes slip aside of itself, and we cannot help seeing. Of course, however, it depends upon the disposition. Some people can, metaphorically, smoke cigarettes and make puns by the deathbeds of their dearest friends, or even on their own. One should pray for a disposition like that—it makes the world so much pleasanter.

By the time that the horses had done their forage and Mouti had forced the bits into their

reluctant mouths, the angry splendour of the sunset had faded, and the quiet night was falling over the glowing veldt like a pall on one scarce dead. There was, fortunately for the travellers, a bright half-moon, and by its light John managed to direct the cart over many a weary mile. On he went for hour after hour, keeping his tired horses to the collar as best he could, till at last, about eleven o'clock, he saw the lights of Heidelberg before him, and knew that the question of whether or no his journey was at an end would speedily be decided for him. However, there was nothing for it but to go on and take his chance of slipping through. Presently he crossed a little stream, and made out the shape of a cart just ahead, around which men and a couple of lanterns were moving. No doubt, he thought to himself, it was the Bishop, who had been stopped by the Boers. He was quite close to the cart when it moved on, and in another second he was greeted by the rough challenge of a sentry, and caught sight of the cold gleam of a rifle barrel.

“Wie da?” [Who’s there?]

“Friend!” he answered cheerfully, though feeling far from cheerful.

There was a pause, during which the sentry called to another man, who came up yawning, and saying something in Dutch. Straining his ears he caught the words, "Bishop's man," and this gave him an idea.

"Who are you, Englishman?" asked the second man gruffly, holding up a lantern to look at John, and speaking in English.

"I am the Bishop's chaplain, sir," he answered mildly, trying desperately to look like an unoffending clergyman, "and I want to get on to Pretoria with him."

The man with the lantern inspected him closely. Fortunately he had on a dark coat and a clerical-looking black felt hat; the same that Frank Muller had put a bullet through.

"He is a preacher fast enough," said the one man to the other. "Look, he is dressed like an old crow! What did Om Krüger's pass say, Jan? Was it two carts or one that we were to let through? I think that it was one."

The other man scratched his head.

"I think it was two," he said. He did not like to confess to his comrade that he could not read. "No, I am sure that it was two."

"Perhaps we had better send up to Om Krüger and ask?" suggested the first man.

"Om Krüger will be in bed, and he puts up his quills like a porcupine if one wakes him," was the answer.

"Then let us keep the damned preaching Englishman till to-morrow."

"Pray let me go on, gentlemen," said John, still in his mildest voice. "I am wanted to preach the word at Pretoria, and to watch by the wounded and dying."

"Yes, yes," said the first man, "there will soon be plenty of wounded and dying there. They will all be like the rooibaatjes at Bronker's Spruit. Lord, what a sight that was! But, they will get the Bishop, so they won't want you. You can stop and look after our wounded, if the rooibaatjes manage to hit any of us." And he beckoned to him to come out of the cart.

"Hullo!" said the other man, "here is a bag of mealies. We will commandeer that, anyhow." And he took his knife and cut the line with which the sack was fastened to the back of the cart, so that it fell to the ground. "That will feed our horses for a week," he said with a chuckle, in which the other man joined. It was pleasant to

become so easily possessed of an unearned increment in the shape of a bag of mealies.

"Well, are we to let the old crow go?" said the first man.

"If we don't let him go we shall have to take him up to headquarters, and I want to go to sleep." And he yawned.

"Well, let him go," answered the other. "I think you are right. The pass said two carts. Be off, you damned preaching Englishman!"

John did not wait for any more, but laid the whip across the horses' backs with a will.

"I hope we did right," said the man with the lantern to the other as the cart bumped off. "I am not sure he was a preacher after all. I have half a mind to send a bullet after him." But his companion, who was very sleepy, gave no encouragement to the idea, so it dropped.

On the following morning when Commandant Frank Muller—having heard that his enemy John Niel was on his way up with the Cape cart and four grey horses—ascertained that a vehicle answering to that description had been allowed to pass through Heidelberg in the dead of night, his state of mind may better be imagined than described.

As for the two sentries, he had them tried by court-martial and set them to make fortifications for the rest of the rebellion. They can neither of them now hear the name of a clergyman mentioned without breaking out into a perfect flood of blasphemy.

Luckily for John, although he had been delayed for five minutes or more, he managed to overtake the cart in which he presumed the Bishop was ensconced. His lordship had been providentially delayed by the breaking of a trace; otherwise, it is clear that his self-nominated chaplain would never have got through the steep streets of Heidelberg that night. The whole town was choked up with Boer waggons, full now of sleeping Boers. Over one batch of waggons and tents John made out the Transvaal flag fluttering idly in the night breeze, marking, no doubt, the headquarters of the Triumvirate, and emblazoned with the appropriate emblem of an ox-waggon and an armed Boer. Once the cart ahead of him was stopped by a sentry, and some conversation ensued. Then it went on again; and so did John, unmolested. It was weary work, that journey through Heidelberg, and full of terrors for John, who every moment expected to be

stopped and dragged off ignominiously to gaol. The horses, too, were dead beat, and made frantic attempts to turn and stop at every house. But, somehow, they got through the little place, and then were stopped once more. Again the first cart got on ahead, but this time John was not so lucky.

"The pass said one cart," said a voice.

"Yah, yah, one cart," answered another.

John again put on his clerical air and told his artless tale; but neither of the men could understand English, so they went to a waggon that was standing about fifty yards away, to fetch somebody who could.

"Now, Inkoos," whispered the Zulu Mouti, "drive on! drive on!"

John took the hint and lashed the horses with his long whip; while Mouti, bending forward over the splashboard, thrashed the wheelers with a sjambock. Off went the team in a spasmodic gallop, and had covered a hundred yards of ground before the two sentries realised what had happened. Then they began to run after the cart shouting, but were soon lost in the darkness.

John and Mouti did not spare the whip, but pressed on up the stony hills on the Pretoria side

of Heidelberg without a halt. They were, however, unable to keep up with the cart ahead of them, which was evidently more freshly horsed. About midnight, too, the moon vanished altogether, and they had to creep on as best they could through the darkness. Indeed, so dark was it, that Mouti was obliged to get out and lead the exhausted horses, one of which would now and again fall down, and have to be cruelly flogged before it would rise. Once, too, the cart very nearly upset; and on another occasion was within an inch or two of rolling down a precipice.

This went on till two in the morning, when John found that it was impossible to get the wearied beasts a yard farther. So, having luckily come to some water about fifteen miles out of Heidelberg, he halted, and having let the horses drink, gave them as much forage as they could eat. One lay down at once, and refused to touch anything—a sure sign of great exhaustion; another ate lying down; but the other two filled themselves in a satisfactory way. Then came a weary wait for the dawn. Mouti slept a little, but John did not dare to do so. All he could do was to eat a little “biltong” [dried game flesh] and bread,

drink some square face and water, and then sit down in the cart, his rifle between his knees, and wait for the light. At last it came, lying on the Eastern sky like a promise, and he once more fed the horses. And now a new difficulty arose. The animal that would not eat was clearly too weak to pull, so the harness had to be altered, and the three sound animals harnessed unicorn fashion, while the sick one was fastened to the rear of the cart. Then they got off again.

By eleven o'clock they reached an hotel, or wayside house, known as Ferguson's, and situate about twenty miles from Pretoria. It was empty, except for a couple of cats and a stray dog. The inhabitants had evidently fled from the Boers. Here John stabled and fed his horses, giving them all that remained of the forage; and then, once more, started on for the last stage. The road was dreadful; and he knew that the country must be full of hostile Boers, but fortunately he met none. It took him four hours to get over the twenty miles of ground; but it was not until he got to the "Poort," or neck running into Pretoria, that he saw a vestige of a Boer. Then he made out two mounted men riding along the top of a precipitous stone-strewn ridge, some six

hundred yards or so from him. At first he thought that they were going to descend it, but presently they changed their minds and got off their horses.

While he was still wondering what this might portend, he saw a puff of white smoke float up from where the men were, and then another. Then came the sharp unmistakable "ping" of a bullet passing, as far as he could judge, within some three feet of his head, followed by a second "ping," and a cloud of dust beneath the belly of the first horse. The two Boers were firing at him.

He did not wait for any more target practice, but, thrashing the horses to a canter, got the cart round a projecting bank before they could load and fire again. After that, he saw no more of them.

At last he reached the mouth of the Poort, and saw the prettiest of the South African towns, with its red and white houses, its tall clumps of trees, and pink lines of blooming rose hedges lying on the plain before him, all set in the green veldt, and made beautiful by the golden light of the afternoon, and thanked God for the sight. He knew that he was safe now, and let his tired horses walk slowly down the hillside and across

the bit of plain beyond. To his left were the gaol and the barrack-sheds, and gathered about them were hundreds of waggons and tents, towards which he drove. Evidently the town was deserted and its inhabitants were in laager. When he got within half a mile or so, a picket of mounted men came riding towards him, followed by a miscellaneous crowd on horseback and on foot.

"Who goes there?" shouted a voice in honest English.

"A friend who is uncommonly glad to see you," he answered, with that feeble jocosity we are all apt to indulge in when a great weight is at length lifted from our nerves.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRETORIA.

JESS did not have a very happy time of it at Pretoria previous to the outbreak of hostilities. Most people who have made a great moral effort, and after a severe mental struggle entered on the drear path of self-sacrifice, have experienced the reaction that will follow as certainly as the night follows the day. It is one thing to renounce the light, to stand in the full glow of the setting beams of our imperial joy and chant out our farewell, and quite another to live alone in the darkness. For a little while memory may support us, but memory grows faint. On every side is the thick, cheerless pall and the stillness through which no sound comes. We are alone, quite alone, cut off from the fellowship of the day, unseeing and unseen. More especially is this so when our dungeon is of our own making, and we ourselves have shot its bolts. There is a natural night that comes to all, and in its unwavering course swallows every

hope and fear, for ever and for ever. To this we can more easily resign ourselves, for we recognise the universal lot and bow ourselves beneath the all-effacing hand. The earth does not pine when the daylight passes from its peaks; it only sleeps.

But Jess had buried herself, and she knew it. There was no absolute need for her to have resigned her affection to her sister's: she had done so of her own will, and at times she naturally enough regretted it. Self-denial is a stern-faced angel. If only we hold him fast and wrestle with him long enough he will speak us soft words of happy sound, just as, if we wait long enough in the darkness of the night, stars will come to share our loneliness. Still this is one of those things that time hides from us and only reveals at his own pleasure; and, so far as Jess was concerned, his pleasure was not yet. Outwardly, however, she showed no sign of her distress and of the passion which was eating at her heart. She was pale and silent, it is true, but then she had always been remarkable for her pallor and silence. Only she gave up her singing.

And so the weeks went on, drearily enough for the poor girl, who was doing what other people

did—eating and drinking, riding, and going to parties like the rest of the Pretoria world, till at last she began to think that she had better be going home again, lest she should wear out her welcome. And yet she dreaded to do so, mindful of her daily prayer to be delivered from temptation. As to what was going on at Mooi-fontein she was in almost complete ignorance. Bessie wrote to her, of course, and so did her uncle once or twice, but they did not tell her much of what she wanted to know. Bessie's letters were, it is true, full of allusions to what Captain Niel was doing, but she did not go beyond that. Her reticence, however, told her observant sister more than her words. Why was she so reticent? No doubt because things still hung in the balance. And then she would think of what it all meant for her, and now and again give way to an outburst of passionate jealousy which would have been painful enough to witness if anybody could have been there to see it.

And so the time went on towards Christmas, for Jess, having been warmly pressed to do so, had settled to stay over Christmas and return to the farm with the new year. There had been a great deal of talk in the town about the Boers,

but she was too much preoccupied with her own affairs to pay much attention to it. Nor, indeed, was the public mind greatly moved; they were so much accustomed to Boer scares at Pretoria, and hitherto they had invariably ended in smoke. And then all of a sudden, on the morning of the eighteenth of December, came the news of the proclamation of the Republic, and the town was thrown into a ferment, and there was a talk of going into laager, and, anxious as she was to get away, Jess could see no hope of returning to the farm till the excitement was over. Then, a day or two later, Conductor Egerton came limping into Pretoria from the scene of the disaster at Bronker's Spruit, with the colours of the 94th Regiment tied round his middle, and such a tale to tell that the blood went to her heart and seemed to stagnate there as she listened to it.

And after that there was confusion worse confounded. Martial law was proclaimed, and the town, which was large, straggling, and incapable of defence, was abandoned, the inhabitants being ordered into laager on the high ground overlooking the city. There they were, young and old, sick and well, delicate women and little children,

all crowded together in the open under the cover of the fort, with nothing but canvas tents, waggon, and sheds to shelter them from the fierce summer suns and rains. Jess had to share a waggon with her friend and her friend's sister and mother, and found it rather a tight fit even to lie down. Sleep with all the noises of the camp going on round her was a practical impossibility.

It was about three o'clock on the day following that first miserable night in the laager when, by the last mail that passed into Pretoria, she got Bessie's letter, announcing her engagement to John. She took her letter and went some way from the camp to the side of Signal Hill, where she was not likely to be disturbed, and, finding a nook shaded in by mimosa-trees, sat down and broke the envelope. Before she had got to the foot of the first page she saw what was coming and set her teeth. Then she read the long letter through from beginning to end without flinching, though the words of affection seemed to burn her. So it had come at last. Well, she expected it, and had plotted to bring it about, so really there was no reason in the world why she should feel disappointed. On the contrary, she ought to rejoice, and for a little while she really did rejoice

in her sister's happiness. It made her happy to think that Bessie, whom she dearly loved, was happy.

And yet she felt angry with John with that sort of anger which we feel against those who have blindly injured us. Why should he have it in his power to hurt her so? Still she hoped that he would be happy with Bessie, and then she hoped that these wretched Boers would take Pretoria, and that she would be shot or put out of the way somehow. She had no heart for life; all the colour had faded from her sky. What was she to do with herself? Marry somebody and busy herself with rearing a pack of children? It would be a physical impossibility to her. No, she would go away to Europe and mix in the great stream of life and struggle with it, and see if she could win a place for herself among the people of her day. She had it in her, she knew that; and now that she had put herself out of the reach of passion she would be more likely to succeed, for success is to the impassive, who are also the strong. She would not stop on the farm after John and Bessie were married; she was quite clear as to that; nor, if she could avoid it, would she return there before they were married.

She would see him no more, no more! Alas, that she had ever seen him!

Feeling somewhat happier, or at any rate calmer, in this determination, she rose to return to the noisy camp, extending her walk, however, by making a *détour* towards the Heidelberg road, for she was anxious to be as long alone as she could. She had been walking some ten minutes when she caught sight of a cart that seemed familiar to her, with three horses harnessed in front of it and one tied behind, which were also familiar. There were a lot of men walking alongside of the cart all talking eagerly. She halted to let the little procession go by, when suddenly she perceived John Niel among the men and recognised the Zulu Mouti on the box. *There* was the man whom she had just vowed never to see again, and the sight of him seemed to take all her strength out of her, so that she felt inclined to sink involuntarily upon the veldt. His sudden appearance was almost uncanny in the sharpness of its illustration of her impotence in the hands of Fate. She felt it then; all in an instant it seemed to be borne in upon her mind that she could not help herself, but was only the instrument in the hands of a superior power

whose will she was fulfilling through the workings of her passion, and to whom her individual fate was a matter of little moment. It was inconclusive reasoning and perilous doctrine, but it must be allowed that the circumstances gave it the colour of truth. And, after all, the borderline between fatalism and free-will has never been quite authoritatively settled, even by St. Paul, so perhaps she was right. Mankind does not like to admit it, but it is, at the least, a question whether we can oppose our little wills against the forces of the universal law, or derange the details of the unvarying plan to suit the petty wants and hopes of individual mortality. Jess was a clever woman, but it would take a wiser head than hers to know where or when to draw that red line across the writings of our life.

On came the cart and the knot of men, and then suddenly John looked up and saw her looking at him with those dark eyes that did indeed seem at times as though they were the windows of her soul. He turned and said something to his companions and to the Zulu Mouti, who went on with the cart, and then came towards her smiling and with outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Jess?" he said. "So I have found you all right?"

She took his hand and answered, almost angrily, "Why have you come? Why did you leave Bessie and my uncle?"

"I came because I was sent, and also because I wished to. I wanted to get you back home before Pretoria was besieged."

"You must have been mad! How could you expect to get back? We shall both be shut up here together now."

"So it appears. Well, things might be worse," he added cheerfully.

"I do not think that anything could be worse," she answered with a stamp of her foot, and then, quite thrown off her balance, burst incontinently into a flood of tears.

John Niel was a very simple-minded man, and it never struck him to attribute her grief to any other cause than anxiety at the state of affairs and at her incarceration for an indefinite period in a besieged town that ran the daily risk of being taken *vi et armis*. Still he was a little hurt at the manner of his reception after his long and most perilous journey, which is not, perhaps, to be wondered at.

"Well, Jess," he said, "I think that you might speak a little more kindly to me, considering—considering all things. There, don't cry, they are all right at Mooifontein, and I dare say that we shall get back there somehow some time or other. I had a nice business to get here at all, I can tell you."

She suddenly stopped weeping and smiled, her tears passing away like a summer storm. "How did you get through?" she asked. "Tell me all about it, Captain Niel," and accordingly he did.

She listened in silence while he sketched the chief events of his journey, and when he had done she spoke in quite a changed tone.

"It is very good and kind of you to have risked your life like this for me. Only I wonder that you did not all of you see that it would be of no use. We shall both be shut up here together now, that is all, and that will be very sad for you and Bessie."

"Oh! So you have heard of our engagement?" he said.

"Yes, I got Bessie's letter about a couple of hours ago, and I congratulate you both very much. I think that you will have the sweetest

and loveliest wife in South Africa, Captain Niel; and I think that Bessie will have a husband any woman might be proud of;" and she half bowed and half curtsied to him as she said it, with a graceful little air of dignity that was very taking.

"Thank you," he said simply; "yes, I think I am a very lucky fellow."

"And now," she said, "we had better go and see about the cart. You will have to get a stand for it in that wretched laager. You must be very tired and hungry;" and they started.

A few minutes' walk brought them to the cart, which Mouti had outspanned close to Mrs. Neville's waggon, where Jess and her friends were living, and the first person they saw was Mrs. Neville herself. She was a good, motherly colonial woman, accustomed to a rough life, and not easily disturbed by an emergency like the present.

"My goodness, Captain Niel!" she cried, as soon as Jess had introduced him. "Well, you are plucky to have forced your way through all those horrid Boers! I am sure I wonder that they did not shoot you or beat you to death with sjambocks, the brutes. Not that there is much use in your coming, for you will never be able

to get Jess back till Sir George Colley relieves us, and that can't be for two months, they say. Well, there is one thing; Jess will be able to sleep in the cart now, and you can get one of the patrol-tents and sleep alongside. It won't be quite proper, perhaps, but in these times we can't stop to consider propriety. There, there, you go off to the Governor. He will be glad enough to see you, I'll be bound. I saw him at the other end of the camp, there, five minutes ago, and we will have the cart arranged and see all about it."

Thus abjured, John departed, and when he returned half an hour afterwards, having told his eventful tale, which did not, however, convey any information of general value, he was rejoiced to find the process of "getting things straight" was in good progress. What was better still, Jess had fried him a beefsteak over the camp-fire, and was now employed in serving it on a little table by the waggon. He sat down on a camp-stool and ate his meal heartily enough, while Jess waited on him and Mrs. Neville chattered away.

"By the way," she said, "Jess tells me that you are going to marry her sister. Well, I wish you joy. A man wants a wife in a country like

this. It isn't like England, where in five cases out of six he might as well go and cut his throat as get married. It saves him money here, and children are a blessing, as Nature meant them to be, and not a burden, as civilisation has made them. Lord, how my tongue does run on! It isn't delicate to talk about children when you have only been engaged a couple of weeks; but, you see, that's what it all comes to after all. She's a pretty girl, Bessie, and a good one too—I don't know her much—though she hasn't got the brains of Jess here. That reminds me; as you are engaged to Bessie, of course you can look after Jess, and nobody will think anything of it. Ah! if you only knew what a place this is for talk, though their talk is pretty well scared out of them now, I'm thinking. My husband is coming round presently to the cart to help to get Jess's bed into it. Lucky it's big. We are such a tight fit in that waggon that I shall be downright glad to see the last of the dear girl; though, of course, you'll both come and take your meals with us."

Jess heard all this in silence. She could not well insist upon stopping in the crowded waggon; it would be asking too much; and, besides, she

had had one night in the waggon, and that was quite enough for her. Once she suggested that she should see if she could not get the nuns to take her in at the convent, but Mrs. Neville instantly suppressed the notion.

“Nuns!” she said; “nonsense. When your own brother-in-law — at least he will be your brother-in-law if the Boers don’t make an end of us all—is here to take care of you, don’t talk about going to a parcel of nuns. It will be as much as they can do to look after themselves, I’ll be bound.”

As for John, he ate his steak and said nothing. The arrangement seemed a very proper one to him.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY.

JOHN soon settled down into the routine of camp life in Pretoria, which, after one once got accustomed to it, was not so disagreeable as might have been expected, and possessed, at any rate, the merit of novelty. Although he was an officer of the army, John preferred, on the whole, having several horses to ride, and his services not being otherwise required, to enroll himself in the corps of mounted volunteers, known as the Pretoria Carbineers, in the humble capacity of a sergeant, and this he obtained leave from the officer commanding the troops to do. He was an active man, and his duties in connection with the corps kept him fully employed during most of the day, and sometimes, when there was outpost duty to be done, during a good part of the night too. For the rest, whenever he got back to the cart—by which he had stipulated he should be allowed to sleep in order to protect Jess in case of any

danger—he always found her ready to greet him, and every little preparation made for his comfort that was possible under the circumstances. Indeed, as time went on, they found it more convenient to set up their own little mess instead of sharing that of their friends, and so they used every day to sit down and breakfast and dine together at a little table rigged up out of a packing-case, and placed under an extemporary tent, for all the world like a young couple picnicking on their honeymoon. Of course the whole thing was very irksome in a way, but it is not to be denied that it had a charm of its own. To begin with, Jess, when once one got thoroughly to know her, was one of the most delightful companions to a man like John Niel that it was possible to meet with. Never, till this long *tête-à-tête* at Pretoria, had he guessed how powerful and original was her mind, or how witty she could be when she liked. There was a fund of dry and suggestive humour about her, which, although it would no more bear being written down than champagne will bear standing in a tumbler, was very pleasant to listen to, more especially as John soon discovered that he was the only person so privileged. Her friends and relations had never

suspected that Jess was humorous. Another thing that struck him about her, as time went on, was that she was growing quite handsome. She had been very pale and thin when he reached Pretoria, but before a month was over she had got, comparatively speaking, stout, which was an enormous gain to her appearance. Her pale face, too, gathered a faint tinge of colour that came and went capriciously, like star-light on the water, and her beautiful eyes grew deeper and more beautiful than ever.

"Who would ever have thought that it was the same girl!" said Mrs. Neville to him, holding up her hands as she watched Jess solemnly surveying a half-cooked mutton chop; "why, she used to be such a poor creature, and now she's quite a fine woman. And that with this life too, which is wearing me to a shadow and has half-killed my dear daughter."

"I suppose it is being in the open air," said John, it having never occurred to him that the medicine that was doing Jess so much good might be happiness. But so it was. At first there had been a struggle, then a lull, and after that an idea. Why should she not enjoy his society while she could? He had been thrown into her way

through no wish of hers. She had no desire to wean him from Bessie; or if she had the desire, it was one which she was far too honourable a woman to entertain. He was perfectly innocent of the whole story; to him she was the young lady who happened to be the sister of the woman he was going to marry, that was all. Why should she not pluck her innocent roses whilst she might? She forgot that the rose is a flower with a dangerous perfume, and one that is apt to confuse the senses and turn the head. So she gave herself full swing, and for some weeks went nearer to knowing what happiness really meant than she ever had before. What a wonderful thing is the love of a woman in its simplicity and strength, and how it gilds all the poor and common things of life and even finds a joy in service! The prouder the woman the more delight does she extract from her self-abasement before her idol. Only not many women can love like Jess, and when they do they almost invariably make some fatal mistake, whereby the wealth of their affection is wasted, or, worse still, becomes a source of misery or shame to themselves and others.

It was after they had been incarcerated in

Pretoria for a month that a bright idea occurred to John. About a quarter of a mile from the outskirts of the camp stood a little house known, probably on account of its diminutive size, as "The Palatial." This cottage had been, like almost every other house in Pretoria, abandoned to its fate, its owner, as it happened, being away from the town. One day, in the course of a walk, John and Jess crossed the little bridge that spanned the sluit and went in to inspect the place. Passing down a path lined on either side with young blue gums, they reached the little tin-roofed cottage. It consisted of two rooms—a bedroom and a good-sized sitting-room, in which still stood a table and a few chairs, with a stable and a kitchen at the back. They went in and sat down by the open door and looked out. The grounds of the little place sloped down towards a valley, on the farther side of which rose a wooded hill. To the right, too, was a hill clothed in deep green bush. The grounds themselves were planted with vines, just now loaded with bunches of ripening grapes, and surrounded with a beautiful hedge of monthly roses that formed a blaze of bloom. Near the house, too, was a bed of double roses, some of them exceedingly beauti-

ful, and all flowering with a profusion unknown in this country. Altogether it was a delightful little spot, and after the noise and glare of the camp, seemed perfectly heavenly; and they sat there and talked a great deal about the farm and old Silas Croft and a little about Bessie.

"This *is* nice," said Jess presently, putting her hands behind her head and looking out at the bush beyond.

"Yes," said John. "I say, I've got an idea. I vote we take up our quarters here—during the day, I mean. Of course we shall have to sleep in camp, but we might eat here, you know, and you could sit here all day; it would be as safe as a church, for those Boers will never try to storm the town, I am sure of that."

Jess reflected, and soon came to the conclusion that it would be a charming arrangement, and, accordingly, next day she set to work and got the place as nice and tidy as circumstances would allow, and they commenced housekeeping.

The upshot of this arrangement was that they were thrown more together even than before. Meanwhile the siege dragged its slow length along. No news whatever reached the town from outside, but that did not trouble the inhabitants

very much, as they were sure that Colley was advancing to their relief, and even got up sweepstakes as to the date of his arrival. Now and then a sortie took place, but, as the results attained were very small, and were not, on the whole, creditable to our arms, perhaps the less said about them the better. John, of course, went out on these occasions, and then Jess would endure agonies that were all the worse because she had to conceal them. She lived in constant terror lest he should be among the killed. However, nothing happened to him, and things went on as usual till the twelfth of February, on which day an attack was made on a place called the Red House Kraal, which was occupied by Boers near a spot known as the Six-mile Spruit.

The force, which was a mixed one, left Pretoria before daybreak, and John went with it. He was rather surprised when, on going to the cart in which Jess slept, to get some little thing before saddling up, he found her sitting on the box in the night dews with a cup of hot coffee she had prepared for him in her hand.

"What do you mean by this, Jess?" he asked sharply. "I will not have you getting up in the middle of the night to make coffee for me."

"I have not got up," she answered quietly; "I have not been to bed."

"That makes matters worse," he said; but nevertheless he drank the coffee and was glad to get it, while she sat on the box and watched him.

"Put on your shawl and get something over your head," he said, "the dew will soak you through. Look, your hair is all wet."

Presently she spoke. "I wish you would do something for me, John," for she called him John now. "Will you promise?"

"How like a woman," he said, "to ask one to promise a thing without saying what it is."

"I want you to promise for Bessie's sake," she said.

"Well, what is it, Jess?"

"Not to go on this sortie. You know you can easily get out of it if you like."

He laughed. "You little silly, why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't laugh at me because I am nervous. I am afraid that — that something might happen to you."

"Well," he remarked consolingly, "every bullet has its billet, and if it does I don't see that it can be helped."

"Think of Bessie," she said again.

"Look here, Jess," he answered testily, "what is the good of trying to take the heart out of a fellow like this? If I am going to be shot I can't help it, and I am not going to show the white feather, even for Bessie's sake; so there you are, and now I must be off."

"You are quite right, John," she said quietly. "I should not have liked to hear you say anything different, but I could not help speaking. Good-bye, John; God bless you!" and she stretched down her hand, which he took, and went.

"Upon my word, she has given me quite a turn," reflected John to himself, as the troop crept on through the white mists of dawn. "I suppose she thinks that I am going to be plugged. Perhaps I am! I wonder how Bessie would take it. She would be awfully cut up, but I expect that she would get over it pretty soon. Now I don't think that Jess would get over a thing of that sort in a hurry. That is just the difference between the two; the one is all flower and the other is all root."

And then he fell to wondering how Bessie was, and what she was doing, and if she missed

him as much as he missed her, and so on, till his mind came back to Jess, and he reflected what a charming companion she was, and how thoughtful and kind, and breathed a secret hope that she would continue to live with them after they were married. Somehow they had got to those terms, perfectly innocent in themselves, in which two people become absolutely necessary to each other's daily life. Indeed, Jess had got a long way farther than that, but of this he was of course ignorant. He was still at the former stage, and was not himself aware how large a proportion of his daily thoughts were occupied by this dark-eyed girl or how completely her personality was overshadowing him. He only knew that she had the knack of making him feel thoroughly happy in her society. When he was talking to her, or even sitting silently by her, he became aware of a sensation of restfulness and reliance that he had never before experienced in the society of a woman. Of course this was to a large extent the natural homage of the weaker nature to the stronger, but it was also something more. It was the shadow of that utter sympathy and perfect accord which is the surest sign of the presence of the highest forms of affection, and

which, when it accompanies the passion of men and women, as it sometimes though rarely does, being more often to be found in its highest form in those relations from which the element of sexuality is excluded, raises it almost above the level of the earth. For the love where that sympathy exists, whether it is between mother and son, husband and wife, or those who, whilst desiring it, have no hope of that relationship, is an undying love, and will endure till the night of Time has swallowed all things.

Meanwhile, as John reflected, the force to which he was attached was moving into action, and he soon found it necessary to come down to the unpleasantly practical details of Boer warfare. More particularly did this come home to his mind when, shortly afterwards, the man next to him was shot dead, and a little later he himself was slightly wounded by a bullet which passed between his saddle and his thigh. Into the details of the fight that ensued it is not necessary to enter here. They were, if anything, more discreditable than most of the episodes of that unhappy war in which the holding of Potchefstroom, Lydenburg, Rustenburg, and Wakkerstroom are the only bright spots. Suffice it to say that they

ended in something very like an utter rout of the English at the hands of a much inferior force, and that, a few hours after he had started, John found himself on the return road to Pretoria, with a severely wounded man behind his saddle (the ambulance being left in the hands of the Boers) who, as they went painfully along, mingled curses of shame and fury with his own. Meanwhile exaggerated accounts of what had happened had got into the town, and, amongst other things, it was said that Captain Niel had been shot dead. One man who came in stated that he saw him fall, and that he was shot through the head. This Mrs. Neville heard with her own ears, and, greatly shocked, started to communicate the intelligence to Jess.

As soon as it was daylight, Jess had, as was customary with her, gone over to the little house which she and John occupied, "The Palatial," as it was ironically called, and settled herself there for the day. First she tried to work and could not, so she took a book that she had brought with her and began to read, but it was a failure also. Her eyes would wander from the page and her ears strain to catch the distant booming of the big guns that came from time to time floating

across the hills. The fact of the matter was that the poor girl was the victim of a presentiment that something was going to happen to John. Most people of imaginative mind have suffered from this kind of thing at one time or other in their lives, and have lived to see the folly of it; and, indeed, there was more in the circumstances of the present case to excuse the indulgence in the luxury of presentiments than is usual. Indeed, as it happened, she was not far out—only a sixteenth of an inch or so—for John was very *nearly* killed.

Not finding Jess in camp, Mrs. Neville made her way across to "The Palatial," where she knew the girl sat, crying as she went, at the thought of the news that she had to communicate, for the good soul had grown very fond of John Niel. Jess, with that acute sense of hearing which often accompanies nervous excitement, caught the sound of the little gate at the bottom of the garden almost before her visitor had got through it, and ran round the corner of the house to see who it was.

One glance at Mrs. Neville's tear-stained face was enough for her. She knew what was coming, and clasped at one of the young blue gum-trees

that grew along the path to prevent herself from falling.

"What is it?" she said faintly. "Is he dead?"

"Yes, my dear, yes; shot through the head, they say."

Jess made no answer, but clung to the sapling, feeling as though she were going to die herself, and faintly hoping that she might do so. Her eyes wandered vaguely from the face of the messenger of evil, first up to the sky, then down to the cropped and trodden veldt. Past the gate of "The Palatial" garden ran a road, which, as it happened, was a short cut from the scene of the fight, and down this road came four Kafirs and half-castes, bearing something on a stretcher, with three or four carbineers riding behind. A coat was thrown over the face of the form on the stretcher, but the legs were visible. They were booted and spurred, and the feet fell apart in that peculiarly lax and helpless way of which there is no possibility of mistaking the meaning.

"*Look!*" she said, pointing.

"Ah, poor man, poor man!" said Mrs. Neville, "they are bringing him here to lay him out."

Then Jess's beautiful eyes closed, and down she went with the bending tree. Presently the

sapling snapped, and she fell senseless with a little cry, and as she did so the men with the corpse passed on.

Two minutes afterwards, John Niel, having heard the rumour of his own death on arrival at the camp, and greatly fearing lest it should have got to Jess's ears, came cantering hurriedly across, and, dismounting as well as his wound would allow, limped up the garden path.

"Great Heavens, Captain Niel!" said Mrs. Neville, looking up; "why—we thought that you were dead!"

"And that is what you have been telling her, I suppose," he said sternly, glancing at the pale and deathlike face; "you might have waited till you were sure. Poor girl! it must have given her a turn;" and, stooping down, he got his arms under her, and, lifting her with some difficulty, limped off to the house, where he laid her down upon the table and, assisted by Mrs. Neville, began to do all in his power to revive her. So obstinate was her faint, however, that their efforts were unavailing, and at last Mrs. Neville started off to the camp to get some brandy, leaving him to go on rubbing her hands and sprinkling water on her face.

The good lady had not been gone more than two or three minutes when Jess suddenly opened her eyes and sat up, and then slipped her feet to the ground. Her eyes fell upon John and dilated with wonder, and he thought that she was going to faint again, for even her lips blanched, and she began to shake and tremble all over in the extremity of her agitation.

"Jess, Jess," he said, "for God's sake don't look like that, you frighten me!"

"I thought you were—I thought you were——" she said slowly, and then suddenly burst into a passion of tears and fell forward upon his breast and lay there sobbing her heart out, her brown curls resting against his face.

It was an awkward position, and a most moving one. John was only a man, and the spectacle of this strange woman, to whom he had lately grown so much attached, plunged into intense emotion, awakened, apparently, by anxiety about his fate, stirred him very deeply—as it would have stirred anybody. Indeed, it struck some chord in him for which he could not quite account, and its echoes charmed and yet frightened him. What did it mean?

"Jess, dear Jess, pray stop; I can't bear to see you cry so."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and stood looking at him, her hand resting on the edge of the table behind her. Her face was wet with tears and looked like a dew-washed lily, and her beautiful eyes were alight with a flame that he had never seen in the eyes of woman before. She said nothing, but her whole face was more eloquent than any words, for there are times when the features can convey a message in a language of their own that is more subtle than any tongue we talk. There she stood, her breast heaving with emotion as the sea heaves when the fierceness of the storm has passed—a very incarnation of the intensest love of woman. And as she stood something seemed to pass before her eyes and blind her, and a spirit took possession of her that absorbed all her doubts and fears, and she gave way to a force that was of her and yet compelled her, as, when the wind blows, the sails compel a ship. And then, for the first time, where her love was concerned, she put out all her strength. She knew, and had always known, that she could master him, and force him, to regard her as she regarded him, did she but choose. How she

knew it she could not say, but so it was. And now she yielded to an overmastering impulse and chose. She said nothing, she did not even move, she only looked at him.

"Why were you in such a fright about me?" he stammered.

She did not answer, but kept her eyes upon his face, and it seemed to John as though power flowed from them; for, as she looked, he felt the change come. Everything melted away before the almost spiritual intensity of her gaze. Bessie, honour, his engagement—all were forgotten; the smouldering embers broke into flame, and he knew that he loved this woman as he had never loved any living creature before—that he loved her even as she loved him. Strong man as he was, he shook like a leaf before her.

"Jess," he said hoarsely, "God forgive me! I love you!" and he bent forward to kiss her.

She lifted her face towards him, then suddenly changed her mind, and laid her hand upon his breast.

"You forget," she said, almost solemnly, "you are going to marry Bessie."

Overpowered by a deep sense of shame, and by another sense of the calamity that had over-

taken him, John turned and limped from the house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND AFTER.

IN front of the door of "The Palatial" was a round flower-bed filled with weeds and flowers mixed up together like the good and evil in the heart of a man, and to the right-hand side of this bed stood an old wooden chair with the back off. No sooner had John got outside the door of the cottage than he became sensible that, what between one thing and another—weariness, loss of blood from his wound, and intense mental emotion—if he did not sit down somewhere pretty quickly he should follow the example set by Jess and faint straight away. Accordingly he steered for the old chair and perched himself on it with gratitude. Presently he saw Mrs. Neville running up the path with a bottle of brandy in her hand.

"Ah!" he thought to himself, "that will just come in handy for me. If I don't have a glass of brandy soon I shall roll off this infernal chair—I am sure of it."

"Where is Jess?" panted Mrs. Neville.

"In there," he said; "she has recovered. It would have been better for us both if she hadn't," he added to himself.

"Why, bless me, Captain Niel, how queer you look!" said Mrs. Neville, fanning herself with her hat; "and there is such a row going on at the camp there; the volunteers swear that they will attack the military for deserting them, and I don't know what all; and they simply wouldn't believe me when I said you were not shot. Why, I never! Look! your boot is full of blood! So you were hit after all."

"Might I trouble you to give me some brandy, Mrs. Neville?" said John faintly.

She filled a glass she had brought with her half full of water from a little irrigation furrow that ran down from the main sluic by the road, and then topped it up with brandy. He drank it, and felt decidedly better.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Neville, "there are a pair of you now. You should just have seen that girl go down when she saw the body coming along the road! I made sure that it was you; but it wasn't. They say that it was poor Jim Smith, son of old Smith of Rustenburg. I tell

you what it is, Captain Niel, you had better be careful; if that girl isn't in love with you she is something very like it. A girl does not pop over like that for Dick, Tom, or Harry. You must forgive an old woman like me for speaking out plain, but she is an odd girl is Jess, just like ten women rolled into one so far as her mind goes, and if you don't take care you will get into trouble, which will be rather awkward, as you are going to marry her sister. Jess isn't a girl to have a bit of a flirt to pass away the time and have done with it, I can tell you;" and she shook her head solemnly, as though she suspected him of trifling with his future sister-in-law's young affections, and then, without waiting for an answer, turned and went into the cottage.

As for John, he only groaned. What could he do but groan? The whole thing was self-evident, and if ever a man felt ashamed of himself that man was John Niel. He was a strictly honourable individual, and it cut him to the heart to think that he had entered on a course which, considering his engagement to Bessie, was not honourable. When he a few minutes before had told Jess he loved her he had said a disgraceful thing, however true a thing it might be.

And that was the worst of it; it was true; he did love her. He felt the change come sweeping over him like a wave as she stood looking at him in the room, utterly drowning and overpowering his affection for Bessie, to whom he was bound by every tie of honour. It was a new and a wonderful thing this passion that had arisen within him, as a strong man armed, and driven every other affection away into the waste places of his mind; and, unfortunately, it was an overmastering and, as he already guessed, an enduring thing. He cursed himself in his shame and anger as he sat recovering his equilibrium on the broken chair and tying a handkerchief tightly round his wounded leg. What a fool he had been! Why had he not waited to see which of the two he really took to? Why had Jess gone away like that and thrown him into temptation with her pretty sister? He was sure now that she had cared for him all along. Well, there it was, and a precious bad business too! One thing he was clear about; it should go no farther. He was not going to break his engagement to Bessie; it was not to be thought of. But, all the same, he felt sorry for himself, and sorry for Jess too.

Just then, however, the bandage on his leg

slipped, and the wound began to bleed so fast that he was fain to limp into the house for assistance.

Jess, who had apparently quite got over her agitation, was standing by the table talking to Mrs. Neville, who was persuading her to swallow some of the brandy she had been at such pains to fetch. The moment she caught sight of John's face, which had now turned ghastly white, and saw the red line trickling down his boot, she took up her hat that was lying on the table.

"You had better lie down on the old bedstead in the little room," she said; "I am going for the doctor."

Assisted by Mrs. Neville, he was only too glad to take this advice, but long before the doctor arrived John had followed Jess's example, and, to the intense alarm of Mrs. Neville, who was vainly endeavouring to check the flow of blood, which had now become copious, gone off into a dead faint. On the arrival of the doctor it appeared that the bullet had grazed the walls of one of the arteries on the inside of the thigh without actually cutting them, but that they had now given way, which rendered it necessary to tie the artery. This operation, with the assistance

of chloroform, he proceeded to successfully carry out on the spot, announcing afterwards that a great deal of blood had already been lost.

When at last it was over Mrs. Neville asked about John being moved up to the hospital, but the doctor declared that he must stop where he was, and that Jess must stop and help to nurse him, with the assistance of a soldier's wife whom he would send down.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Neville, "that is very awkward."

"It will be awkwarder if you try to move him at present," was the grim reply, "for the silk may slip, in which case the artery will probably break out again, and he will bleed to death."

As for Jess, she said nothing, but set to work to make preparations for her task of nursing. As Fate had once more thrown them together she accepted the position gladly, though it is only fair to say that she would not have sought it.

In about an hour's time, just as John was beginning to recover from the painful effects of the chloroform, the soldier's wife who was to assist her in nursing arrived. She was, as Jess soon discovered, not only a low stamp of woman, but both careless and ignorant into the bargain, and

all that she could be relied on to do was to carry out some of the rougher work of the sick-room. When John woke up and discovered whose was the presence that was bending over him, and whose the cool hand that lay upon his forehead, he groaned again and went to sleep. But Jess did not go to sleep. She sat by him there throughout the night, till at last the cold lights of the dawn came gleaming through the window and fell upon the white face of the man she loved. He was still sleeping soundly, and, as the night was exceedingly hot and oppressive, she had left nothing but a sheet over him. Before she went to rest a little herself she turned to look at him once more, and as she did so saw the sheet suddenly grow red with blood. The artery had broken out again.

Calling to the soldier's wife to run across to the doctor, Jess shook her patient till he woke, for he was sleeping sweetly through the whole thing, and would, no doubt, have continued to do so till he glided into a deeper sleep; and then between them they did what they could to quench that dreadful pumping flow, Jess knotting her handkerchief round his leg and twisting it with a stick, while he pressed his thumb upon the

severed artery. But, strive as they would, they were only partially successful, and Jess began to think that he would die in her arms from loss of blood. It was agonising to wait there minute after minute and see his life ebbing away.

"I don't think I shall last much longer, Jess. God bless you, dear!" he said. "The place is beginning to go round and round."

Poor soul! she could only set her teeth and wait for the end.

Presently John's pressure on the wounded artery relaxed, and he fainted off, and, oddly enough, just then the flow of blood diminished considerably. Another five minutes, and she heard the quick step of the doctor coming up the path.

"Thank God you have come! He has bled dreadfully."

"I was out attending a poor fellow who was shot through the lung, and that fool of a woman waited for me to come back instead of following. I have brought you an orderly instead of her. By Jove, he has bled! I suppose the silk has slipped. Well, there is only one thing for it. Orderly, the chloroform."

And then followed another long half-hour of

slashing and tying and horror, and when at last the unfortunate John opened his eyes again he was too weak to speak, and could only smile feebly. For three days after this he was in a dangerous state, for if the artery had broken out for the third time the chances were that, having so little blood left in his veins, he would die before anything could be done for him. At times he was very delirious from weakness, and these were the dangerous hours, for it was almost impossible to keep him quiet, and every moment threw Jess into an agony of terror lest the silk fastenings of the artery should break away. Indeed there was only one way in which she could keep him quiet, and that was by placing her slim white hand upon his forehead or giving it to him to hold. Oddly enough, this had more effect upon his fevered mind than anything else. For hour after hour she would sit thus, though her arm ached, and her back felt as if it were going to break in two, till at last she was rewarded by seeing his wild eyes cease their wanderings and close in peaceful sleep.

Yet with it all that week was perhaps the happiest time in her life. There he lay, the man she loved with all the intensity of her deep nature;

and she ministered to him, and felt that he loved her, and depended on her as a babe upon its mother. Even in his delirium her name was continually on his lips, and generally with some endearing term before it. She felt in those dark hours of doubt and sickness as though they two were growing life to life, knit up in a divine identity she could not analyse or understand. She felt that it was so, and she believed that, once being so, whatever her future might be, that communion could never be dissolved, and therefore was she happy, though she knew that his recovery meant their lifelong separation. For though Jess had once, when thrown utterly off her balance, given her passion way, it was not a thing she meant to repeat. She had, she felt, injured Bessie enough already in taking her future husband's heart. That she could not help now, but she would take no more. John should go back to her sister.

And so she sat and gazed at that sleeping man through the long watches of the night, and was happy. There lay her joy. Soon he would be taken from her and she would be left desolate; but whilst he lay there he was hers. It was passing sweet to her woman's heart to place her hand

upon him and see him sleep, for this desire to watch the sleep of a beloved object is one of the highest and strangest manifestations of passion. Truly, and with a keen insight into the human heart, has the poet said that there is no joy like the joy of a woman watching what she loves asleep. As Jess sat and gazed, those beautiful and tender lines came floating into her mind, and she thought how true they were:

For there it lies, so tranquil, so beloved,
All that it hath of life with us is living;
So gentle, stirless, helpless, and unmoved,
And all unconscious of the joy 'tis giving;
All it hath felt, inflicted, passed, and proved,
Hushed into depths beyond the watcher's diving:
There lies the thing we love with all its errors
And all its charms, like death without its terrors.

Ay! there lay the thing she loved.

The time went on, and the artery broke out no more, and then at last came a morning when John opened his eyes and watched the pale earnest face bending over him as though he were trying to remember something. Presently he shut his eyes again. He had remembered.

"I have been very ill, Jess," he said after a pause.

"Yes, John."

"And you have nursed me?"

"Yes, John."

"Am I going to recover?"

"Of course you are."

He shut his eyes again.

"I suppose there is no news from outside?"

"No more; things are just the same."

"Nor from Bessie?"

"None: we are quite cut off."

Then came a pause.

"John," said Jess, "I want to say something to you. When people are delirious, or when delirium is coming on, they sometimes say things that they are not responsible for, and which had better be forgotten."

"Yes," he said, "I understand."

"So," she went on, in the same measured tone, "we will forget everything you may fancy that you said, or that I did, since the time when you came in wounded and found that I had fainted."

"Quite so," said John. "I renounce them all."

"*We* renounce them all," she corrected, and gave a solemn little nod of her head and sighed, and thus they ratified that audacious compact of oblivion.

But it was a lie, and they both knew that it was a lie. If love had existed before, was there anything in his helplessness and her long and tender care to make it less? Alas! no; rather was their companionship the more perfect and their sympathy the more complete. "Propinquity, sir, propinquity," as the wise man said; we all know the evils of it.

It was a lie, and a very common and everyday sort of lie. Who, being behind the scenes, has not laughed in his sleeve to see it acted?—Who has not admired and wondered at the cold and formal bow and shake of the hand, the tender inquiries after the health of the maiden aunt and the baby, the carelessly expressed wish that we may meet somewhere—all so palpably overdone? *That* the heroine of the impassioned scene at which we had unfortunately to assist an hour ago! Where are the tears, the convulsive sobs, the heartbroken grief? And *that* the young gentleman who saw nothing for it but flight or a pistol bullet! There, all the world's a stage, and fortunately most of us can act a bit at a pinch.

Yes, we can act; we can paint the face and powder the hair, and summon up the set smile

and the regulation joke, and make pretence that things are as things were, when they are as different as the North Pole from the Torrid Zone. But unfortunately, or fortunately—I do not know which—we cannot bedeck our inner selves and make them mime as the occasion pleases, and sing the old song when their lips are set to a strange new chant. Of a surety there is within us a spark of the Eternal Truth, for in our own hearts we cannot lie. And so it was with these two. From that day forward they forgot that scene in the sitting-room of “The Palatial,” when Jess put out her strength and John bent and broke before it like a rush before the wind. Surely it was a part of the delirium! They forgot that, now, alas! they loved each other with a love that did but gather force from its despair. They talked of Bessie, and of John’s marriage, and discussed Jess’s plans for going to Europe, just as though these were not matters of spiritual life and death to each of them. In short, however they might for one brief moment have gone astray, now, to their honour be it said, they followed the path of duty with unflinching feet, nor did they cry when the stones cut them.

But it was all a living lie, and they knew it.

For behind them stood the irrevocable Past, who for good or evil had bound them together in his unchanging bonds, and with cords that never can be broken.

END OF VOL. I.

Haggard, H. Rider

Jess

Bd.: 1

1887

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